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BLUE STEELE BOX SET 1

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Part 1

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IT WAS a Friday night and I was on yet another blind date. At least this one was cute.

He had blue/green eyes, curly blond hair and smelled great. His name was William Grant and he was an architect, thirty-two, divorced, no children. William, Billy as he liked to be called, was clean-shaven, articulate, and well read.

We were in Fort Worth, Texas, at a restaurant called *The Round-up*. The décor was western and the dress code, casual. I was wearing my best boots along with a blue dress that hung three inches above my knees. I was also displaying a tasteful bit of cleavage, well, all right, it was an ample bit of cleavage. But hey, they're one of my best features and I never met a man who disliked looking at them.

I was having a good time, and that's when Mickey Kyle walked into the restaurant. Mickey was a lifelong thug who skipped bail three weeks ago and now had a four-thousand-dollar bounty on his head.

Mickey walked up to the bar and spoke to the bartender for a moment. She reached under the counter and brought out a large paper bag. Take-out, Mickey was picking up a take-out order.

"Billy," I said.

"Yes?"

"Do you remember I told you that I was a bounty hunter?"

He smiled, did I mention that he had a great smile, well he did.

"Of course, I remember. Why do you ask?"

"Because I have to go to work now, see that man at the bar, the one with the white bag in his hand? His name is Mickey Kyle and he's worth four thousand dollars to whoever brings him in."

Billy turned his head and stared at Mickey. Mickey Kyle was forty, stood six-foot-four, and weighed nearly three hundred pounds. At the time, he was wearing a sleeveless T-shirt that displayed his many and varied tattoos. He was also bearded and his broad nose hooked a little to the right, while his beady eyes had a mean slant to them.

Billy turned back to me with a look of puzzlement.

"You're calling the cops, right? I mean you're not going to try to arrest him yourself, are you?"

"Mickey is all mine; I've been looking for him for weeks."

I opened my purse and grabbed a pen just as Mickey left the bar. I

then hastily scribbled my number on Billy's palm.

"I had a great time, call me?"

Billy nodded as he stared at his hand and I rushed out of the restaurant while searching my purse for my truck keys. When I reached the parking lot, luck was with me. Mickey was standing outside the restaurant talking to a redheaded woman with too much make-up and shoes I wouldn't be caught dead in. I mean, who wears open-back shoes?

They were standing by a motorcycle that I assumed was Mickey's, but a few moments later, the redhead straddled the bike and rode off. With a gun in my right hand and cuffs in my left, I walked over toward Mickey and smiled.

"Hello, Mickey, nice night huh?"

Mickey looked at the gun and the handcuffs and then stared at me. He didn't begin laughing until his eyes found mine.

"Are you kidding me? You think your skinny little girl ass is gonna take me in? The damn cops must be getting desperate if there hiring chippies now."

"I'm not a cop; I'm a bounty hunter." I tossed the cuffs to him. "Put those on."

He made no move to catch the cuffs; they hit him on the chest and fell to the ground. They were followed by the bag of food, as a second later, he was charging at me. I stood my ground, took careful aim, and pulled the trigger.

I carried a thirty-eight with a two-inch barrel. My gun had a short barrel because it made it easier to carry and I rarely needed it for distance. If I ever had to shoot a target more than a dozen yards away, the gun would have been next to useless.

Mickey was six feet away when I shot him in the left knee. He fell at my side, moaning.

The sound of the shot brought the restaurant crowd outside and I spotted Billy standing near the front. His eyes were wide, and he looked frightened. A moment later, a man pushed past him and headed over to me.

The man was holding a badge in one hand and a gun in the other. His name was Deke Thomas, and he was a Texas Ranger. Deke was John Wayne tough and tall, and even looked a little like ol' Duke. Deke had been a friend of my father's and I went to school with his oldest daughter, Jenna.

Deke looked down at Mickey and then over at me.

"Hey, Blue, is that Mickey Kyle?"

"Yep."

"He's worth what, three grand?"

"Four grand."

While we talked, Mickey moaned, and I do believe I saw tears in his manly eyes.

“Shot him in the knee, huh?”

“He called me a chippie and charged at me.”

“Well, judging by the look of that knee, I’d say his charging days are over.”

A police cruiser arrived, and Deke talked to the cops getting out of it. I looked back at the crowd, searching for Billy, but saw him nowhere in sight.

When all the dust settled, I arrived back home at 2:23 a.m. and fell into bed with a splitting headache.

Billy never called me.

Maybe I should have shot him in the knee too.

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A FEW DAYS LATER, Becca and I were out for a run in Trinity Park.

Becca was my best friend and had been such for as long as I could remember. Her family and mine were neighbors and we were born only two days apart. Becca is a natural blonde with brown eyes, who these days wears her hair short. She says that with five kids under the age of ten, she has no time for worrying about her hair.

My hair is dark and my eyes green. I wear my hair long, always have, and even if I had five kids I would still do so. I am vain when it comes to my hair.

We were both wearing shorts with tank tops and we were both sweating from head to toe. It was a miserably humid day in Fort Worth and the temperature, at eleven a.m., was already in the eighties. We came to a stop near the Mark Twain statue and caught our breath.

"Are you working today?" Becca said.

"Yeah, a man by the name of Vincent Caine jumped bail yesterday; he's an accountant, the bounty is ten grand."

"What did he do?"

"He murdered his wife."

Becca made a face. "Must you always go after the dangerous ones? Doesn't anybody ever skip bail for not paying their parking tickets?"

I smiled. Becca worried about me more than my mother did.

"I'll be careful, and I'll be ten thousand dollars richer when I find him."

"You're really determined to buy a ranch someday, aren't you?"

"Not someday, by the time I'm forty, and I'm well ahead of schedule."

"That Vermont trip really paid off, huh?"

"Yeah," I said, and smiled. A few months ago, in Vermont, I was tracking a fugitive named Sebastian Rojo. I didn't get Rojo due to… unusual circumstances, but I did get the hundred grand in uncut diamonds he was carrying.

Becca walked over and stared at me.

"Do you still think about him?"

"About who?"

"Don't play dumb, Blue, not with me."

I nodded. “Yeah, I still think about him. You would too if you had met him. But, hell, he’s married; I mean he’s *really* married.”

While in Vermont, I met a man named… well, his name doesn’t matter, but he was unlike anyone I had ever known. Sebastian Rojo had taken his wife, Dr. Jessica White, as a hostage to make his escape. I teamed up with the doctor’s husband to rescue his wife and capture Rojo. We got his wife back and I wound up with Rojo’s diamonds.

Becca reached out and gave my hand a squeeze.

“I’m sorry, baby, but you’ll find the right guy someday, ya know?”

“Like you did? You and Richie have been together since the eighth grade. Do you know how lucky you are?”

Becca grinned shyly, “Yeah, I do.”

~

I SPENT the next few days talking to anyone who knew anything about Vincent Caine, his neighbors, relatives, clients. I learned two things. One, most of the people in his life didn’t believe that he killed his wife, and two, most of them didn’t like his wife.

Lucinda Caine, Vincent’s dead wife, was described as selfish by many who knew her. She had been fifteen years younger than her husband, and some thought that the age difference had been part of the problem. I was told that she cheated on her husband, gambled them into bankruptcy and refused to get a job to help dig them out of it. In fact, Lucinda Caine seemed so universally disliked that I sought out the one person who should have something positive to say about her, her mother.

Bobbi Reed, Lucinda’s mother, lived in Dallas with Lucinda’s little sister, Rachel. The house turned out to be a double-wide trailer in a mobile home park off interstate 30.

No one was home when I got there, and so I sat on the trailer’s steps and waited. Sitting in the weeds near the trailer, was an old Volkswagen Beetle that looked like little more than a pile of rust. There were weeds surrounding it, but I noticed that the weeds in front, by the trunk, looked trampled, as if someone had been standing there recently. The trailer too was sunbaked and had paint chipping off.

The trailer had seen better days and so had Bobbi Reed.

Bobbi Reed was forty-four, but looked at least sixty. I caught her coming home from work on the night shift at the hospital; she was a nurse. Her daughter Rachel was with her and was quite a contrast. Rachel Reed was sixteen, shapely, and had about the biggest blue eyes I’d ever seen, while her curly blonde hair fell about her dimpled cheeks.

The three of us sat around the living room with the TV on, but the sound turned down. I was sipping on a cup of coffee that was surprisingly good and listening to Bobbi Reed tell me about her oldest daughter.

"She was a saint, a saint to put up with that man," Bobbi Reed said.

"Why do you say that? What did Vincent do to her?"

"He treated Lucinda like property and wouldn't spend any money on her. The man owned an accounting firm for God's sake; he must have been rolling in money."

"Did you know he filed for bankruptcy recently?"

"That was just a trick to fool the IRS, believe me, Vincent Caine is devious."

"Maybe, but the police think that he killed your daughter to collect on her life insurance."

"He's greedy, that's all. He used my poor daughter from the moment he met her. Did you know that she was only fourteen when they met?"

I raised an eyebrow. "No, I hadn't heard that."

"Lucinda swore to me that nothing went on between them until she married him at eighteen, but I'm not a complete fool, plus, there was that trouble with the neighbor girl."

"That was just a misunderstanding, Mom," Rachel Reed said.

I looked over at her. "What was a misunderstanding?"

"Lucinda and Vincent had a neighbor woman with a teenage daughter," Bobbi said. "Lucinda told me that she caught the girl leaving their house one day when she came home earlier than expected. The girl was attractive and looked older than she was, but she was only fifteen for God's sake."

"What did the girl say?"

"She told Lucinda that she had just stopped by to talk to Vincent about donating money toward new band uniforms."

"That's possible, isn't it?"

"The girl had never been in the band. If she was playing an instrument that day, it was a skin flute."

"Mom!" Rachel said, while I laughed, despite the seriousness of it all.

"What did Lucinda do next?"

"She told the girl's mother about her suspicions; not long after, the girl and her mother moved away. Can you imagine having to tell another woman that your husband may have been fooling around with her child? Lucinda said their marriage was never the same after that."

"How long ago did this happen?"

“A few years ago.”

“If she believed he was a child molester, then why did she stay with him?”

“I hate Vincent for killing my daughter, but there is one thing about him I can’t deny, the man’s a charmer, always was and always will be. Despite his faults, Lucinda loved him.”

The doubt I harbored at that statement must have shown on my face, because Bobbi frowned at me.

“Let me guess, people have been telling you about Lucinda’s affairs? Well, it’s true, but they weren’t affairs, it was just one man, Harold Weidman. He was Lucinda’s dentist and he wanted her to leave Vincent and live with him.”

“Why didn’t she?”

Bobbi shrugged. “Vincent charmed her out of it, said he was a changed man. Two weeks later, she was dead.”

As I was leaving the trailer, I stopped at the bottom of the steps and asked Bobbi one last question.

“You say that Vincent met your daughter when she was only fourteen, how did they meet?”

Bobbi Reed stared at me a while before answering.

“Back then… Vincent was my boyfriend.”

And then, she slowly shut the door.

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DR. HAROLD WEIDMAN had a dental practice in a Fort Worth office building that was a short walk away from the Kimbell Art Museum.

After I explained who I was and why I was there, the doctor agreed to talk with me. We spoke in one of the examination rooms. The antiseptic smell of the place and the sight of the drills made my teeth itch. I hate visiting the dentist.

Dr. Weidman was a pleasant looking man. He was in his mid-thirties and had short brown hair with gray eyes seated behind a pair of round glasses.

"You say that you're a bounty hunter, Miss Steele; that's an unusual profession for a young woman, no?"

I smiled, while hoping that he spotted no flaws in my teeth.

"Bail Enforcement Agent, and there are a few of us, doctor. Now please, tell me everything you know about Lucinda and Vincent Caine."

"About Vincent, I know almost nothing, about Lucinda… it would take a year."

"You loved her?"

"Oh yes, from the moment I laid eyes on her."

"Do you believe that Vincent killed her?"

He shook his head slowly.

"I don't know, probably, or else why would he have fled?"

"Did Lucinda ever mention a place that Vincent might run to, such as a childhood friend, or a relative that he was particularly close to?"

The doctor stared at me. "We spoke of him as little as possible."

"Yes, of course."

"The police have asked me all of this already; do you really think that you'll locate him before they can?"

"Yes doctor, I do."

"Why?"

"Because I have ten thousand more reasons to find him then they do."

~

NEXT, I paid a visit to *Goldman, Harper, Rogers & Dent*. They were the

law firm that was representing Vincent Caine. I had little hope of getting anyone to talk to me, but in my business, you took things as they came. Talking to Caine's attorney could only shed light on where he might have gone, and so I tried to get a few words in with the man.

To my great shock, I was ushered into Gary Dent's office in less than a minute. Gary Dent was younger than I expected, and a hunk. He was six-feet tall and slim, with wavy dark hair and a cleft chin.

As his assistant escorted me into the office, I watched as Dent's eyes took me in from tip to tail. Normally, I wore jeans when working, but lazy girl that I am, I hadn't gotten around to doing the laundry for a while and all my jeans were dirty. So today, I was wearing a black silk skirt with a white blouse and a pair of turquoise boots that rode up to mid-calf. As I sat and crossed my legs, Dent's eyes widened in interest.

He held up my business card.

"A Private Investigator? I thought you were a Bail Enforcement Agent, a Bounty Hunter."

"I'm all three actually; I was a P.I. and later became a Bounty Hunter, but it's the law in Texas that bounty hunters must also have a P.I. license, as I'm sure you know."

He shook his head. "Actually, no, I didn't know that; but now I'll never forget it." Then, he smiled, and I felt my heart go aflutter. I am such a sucker for a great smile, and also humility. A lawyer admitting that he didn't know everything was a first for me.

"The reason I'm here, Mr. Dent—"

"Gary, call me Gary, and you're Blue. Is that really your name, Blue Steele?"

"Yes, my father was expecting a boy."

"Thank God he was disappointed," Gary said, and then he smiled again.

"Thank you for the compliment, Gary, but I'm here to talk about Vincent Caine."

At the mention of Caine, Gary Dent grimaced.

"You don't like Mr. Caine?" I asked.

"Vinnie? Yeah, I like him, no; I just made that face because I'm so pissed at Vinnie for running off. He had zero chance of going to prison for his wife's murder."

I uncrossed my legs and leaned forward.

"Why do you say that?"

"He didn't do it and we could prove it. The timeline was all wrong. Vinnie is a smoker, cigars, at the time his wife was being murdered, he was at a store buying some. We have three witnesses that can place him there, plus the store's security camera."

"He was at the store at the exact time his wife was killed?"

“Well, not the exact time, but it was only twenty minutes after the neighbor swears he heard the gunshot that killed Lucinda, and the cigar shop is a forty-five-minute drive away, so, unless Vinnie learned to fly, he’s innocent.”

“He could have hired someone to kill his wife.”

“Yes, but if he had done that, wouldn’t he have given himself more leeway on the alibi?”

“All right, then why would he run at all?”

Gary smiled at me again. If he kept doing that, I was going to leap over the desk and molest him.

“I’m not at liberty to say, Blue; attorney-client privilege, you know?”

I thought for a moment, and the answer came to me.

“Money, he was hiding money from the IRS, and when he got indicted for murder, all of his financial dealings came to light.” I grinned. “He could actually receive a longer sentence for tax evasion than for murder; that would be a reason to run.”

Gary squinted at me. “You’re a smart one, Blue; I’ll have to remember that.”

“Vincent Caine was planning on divorcing his wife and leaving her with nothing, so he told anyone who would listen that she was gambling him into bankruptcy. Then, after the divorce was final, he would suddenly make a financial recovery.”

“Let’s say that hypothetically that was the truth, does that sound like a man planning to kill his wife?”

"No, it sounds like a man planning to cheat her, not kill her.”

“Exactly.”

“So then, who killed Lucinda Caine?”

“My guess? It was dear old Mom.”

“Bobbi Reed?”

“I’m not just Vinnie’s lawyer. We’ve been friends since college, I was there when he married Lucinda. Bobbi Reed was nowhere in sight. Vinnie met Lucinda while he was dating Bobbi, and then they broke up. A few years later, Vinnie marries Lucinda out of the blue. A suspicious man, or woman, might believe that Vinnie and Lucinda had never lost contact.”

“Even though she was just a child?”

“He swore to me at the time that he had never touched her and that she was a virgin on their wedding night.”

“Did you believe him?”

“I thought I did, but when he contacted me after being charged with murder, I realized that I hadn’t kept in touch with him since the wedding, so, maybe not.”

“But why would Bobbi Reed kill her own daughter?”

“Jealousy, Vinnie told me that Bobbi and Lucinda barely spoke for years, even though Lucinda’s little sister stayed with her from time to time. Vinnie said that Bobbi used them as free babysitters, but other than that, she wanted nothing to do with them. Then, six months ago, Bobbi offered an olive branch and she and Lucinda became best friends. You know what they say: Keep your friends close, and your enemies even closer.”

“Still, her own daughter?”

“Or rival, I guess it depends on how you look at it.”

“So, your theory is that Bobbi Reed killed her own daughter in order to frame Vincent Caine? I don’t know; let’s say it’s true, why now?”

“I take it you’ve met Bobbi Reed?”

“Yes, this morning.”

“Not exactly the picture of health, is she?”

“What are you saying?”

“Bobbi Reed has terminal liver cancer. According to what my investigator found out, she’s got maybe six months to live. If she wanted to get back at Vinnie and Lucinda, now was the only time she had.”

~

WHEN I WAS LEAVING, Gary escorted me to the elevator.

“How old are you, Blue?”

“I’m twenty-eight, why?”

“I’m forty, too old?”

I had several thoughts then. One was serious, one was evasive, and three were just plain wiseass, but in the end, I simply answered, “No.”

“Good, so I’ll call you soon?”

“Yes.”

He gave me his best smile yet, and then the elevator arrived, and we said goodbye.

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I WAS IN MY OFFICE, which is also my truck, a Ford F150 that had more miles on it than I cared to think about. My truck was black with a tan interior and I had owned it since the day I got my driver's license. It was a birthday gift from my father.

I was invited to have dinner with Becca and her family. As I pulled into their driveway, my phone rang. I looked at the caller ID and saw that it was Ron, owner of the AAAAAAAAAA Bail Bonds Company. He used the ten A's so to be sure he was listed first in the yellow pages, but most people just referred to his company as Ten A, which was funny, because Ron's last name was Tenney.

"Hi Ron, what's up?"

"Blue, baby, how's my favorite bloodhound?"

"Good, how about you?"

"I'm good, kid, but listen; I got an easy one for you, and it pays three grand."

I straightened in my seat as Becca and Richie came out to greet me, behind them poured out their brood, three girls and two boys, ages two to nine. I held up an index finger and Becca stopped in her tracks, as Richie told the kids to hush.

"What is it, Ron?"

"A guy by the name of Felix Porta, he skipped a few weeks ago on multiple B&E charges. I got a reliable tip that he's working under the table at the Easy Wax Car Wash, you know, the one on May Street? Come see me and pick up the paper, then go grab Felix, the whole thing should only take a few hours."

"And you say he's worth three grand?" I said, and watched as Becca's face fell. I had blown off the last two invitations to dinner because of work and it looked like I was going to do it again.

"Yeah, three bills, so how soon can you get here?"

I climbed out of my truck and sent Becca a smile.

"Thanks for thinking of me first, Ron, but I'll have to pass; I'm having dinner with my family."

~

I LEFT Becca's that night feeling good and a little wistful that I didn't

have a family of my own yet. Maybe someday.

On the ride home, an idea came to me in a flash and I pulled over to make a call.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Mrs. Reed, this is Miss Steele, do you remember me?"

"Of course, you're that bounty hunter."

"Right, could I ask you a few more questions, ma'am?"

"Yes, but be quick about it; I'm just about to leave for work."

I was quick, and she answered all my questions. After an hour of searching through county records on my laptop, I thought I knew where Vincent Caine was hiding.

~

THE fiFTEEN-YEAR-OLD NEIGHBOR girl that Lucinda suspected her husband of molesting was now a nineteen-year-old adult. Her name was Sarah Miller.

Sarah lived in a tiny first-floor apartment on Lafayette Street in Dallas. I arrived there just after ten o'clock. It was a humid night, and as soon as I left the air-conditioned comfort of my truck, a slick of perspiration began to appear on my forehead.

At the curb, I spotted the SUV registered in Sarah Miller's name. I peeked in a side window and saw that the back seat was loaded with cardboard boxes. It looked like Sarah was planning on moving, likely out of state, and possibly with a fugitive boyfriend in tow.

I headed up the walkway, and that's when I heard the shots, one shot, then a pause, and then five more, six in all.

It sounded like a thirty-eight revolver. I whipped my own gun out and ran toward the front door. It was locked. Just then, a neighbor stuck his head out a second story window.

"Call the police," I said. "Tell them that shots have been fired and that there may be a fugitive on the premises."

The man nodded, and I heard a woman's voice, although I couldn't make out the words.

The man yelled down to me.

"My wife says that someone dressed in black just ran out the back door."

I walked around the building with my gun held level with both hands and my eyes scanning left to right. I had to fight the urge to rush to the back yard as quick as I could. Often, moving fast is no good, it's better to go slow and be careful. As I made the turn at the back, I spotted a shaft of light beaming into the back yard; it was coming from an open doorway.

I approached cautiously, as I kept one eye on the doorway while

scanning the shadows to my right. The neighbor saw someone run out the back door, but that didn't have to mean that they ran away. They could just as easily be hiding.

I peeked into the apartment and saw a kitchen. There was water running in the sink and a small stack of dirty dishes beside it. I let the water run and went farther into the apartment. I didn't have to go very far; they were in the next room.

Vincent Caine and Sarah Miller were both lying dead on the living room floor. Scattered around them were more cardboard boxes, some were full and taped shut, while others were empty.

Sarah had been shot in the forehead once, while Vincent had four distinct wounds in his bare chest. A fifth wound was in a different location. If the bloodstain spreading across his boxers was any indication, Caine had died a falsetto.

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A PATROL CAR responded and I told them my story. As I waited for the homicide detectives to show, my phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Blue, hi, it's Gary Dent. I hope I'm not calling at too late an hour?"

"No, Gary, it's just… listen, I've got some bad news. Vincent Caine is dead, murdered."

"Oh my God, Vinnie… Blue, who killed him?"

"I don't know. I only heard the shots."

"You were there when it happened?"

"Yes, I tracked him down at his girlfriend's apartment, but I got here too late."

"Too late? Any earlier and you might have been murdered too. Tell me where you are and I'll be right there."

"Right, sorry, I should have told you already, after all, Caine was your client."

"Screw Vinnie; I'm coming there to be with you."

And with a smile on my face, I told him the address.

~

GARY ARRIVED JUST as the cops were finishing with me. He walked over and gave me a kiss on the cheek.

"Thank God you're all right."

"I'm fine, and I'm sorry about Caine, I know that at one time he was a good friend of yours."

He nodded. "Yeah, thanks, so tell me, who was the girlfriend?"

"Her name was Sarah Miller; it looks like they were about to run off together. She lived next door to Caine when she was fifteen, apparently, they, eh, kept in touch."

"Jesus, Blue, another teenybopper? Oh Vinnie, you sick bastard."

I took his hand and looked into his eyes.

"I have something to tell you; I think this might all be my fault."

"What do you mean?"

"Earlier tonight, I recalled the story Bobbi Reed told me about Caine's rumored affair with a teenage neighbor. I then wondered if

maybe he had kept in touch with the girl, and, if he did, she might even know where he was hiding."

Gary lifted my hand to his lips and kissed it.

"You're very clever, Blue; I may have to put you on retainer as an investigator. The guy I had looking for Vinnie would have never thought to look here."

"It was a hunch, but I didn't know the girl's name or even which house the girl had lived in, and so I called—"

"Bobbi Reed, you called Bobbi Reed and she put two and two together and came here and killed Vinnie."

"Possibly, I don't know, but I told the police about her and they're going to talk to her."

Gary cupped my face in his hands.

"Nothing here is your fault. Bobbi, or whoever killed Vinnie, is to blame; you got that?"

I smiled. "I got it."

"Good, now let's get out of here."

~

WE DROVE to a diner and had coffee. In between sips, we talked a little about ourselves.

I learned that Gary had married just after college, but that the marriage hadn't even lasted a year.

"So, you've never been married, Blue?"

"No."

"Ever come close?"

"Once, but… it doesn't matter."

"Hmm, it sounds like there's a story there, but I won't pry. So tell me, what gets you going other than catching bad guys?"

I smiled. "Horses."

"Horses? What kind?"

"Quarter horses."

"Oh, you like the quarter milers, the fast ones, eh?"

"Yes, but I love any kind of horse; by the way, do you ride?"

"Not only do I ride, but I own a ranch."

I blinked. "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

"I said I own a cattle ranch, the triple Q, in Bandera."

"You own a ranch? Wait, Bandera is about three hundred miles away. You must not get there too often."

"No, I fly there about every other weekend, in my Cessna."

"You own a ranch *and* an airplane?"

"Yes."

"Jesus, Gary are you rich?"

“I inherited the ranch from my grandfather. I actually own it with my brother and sister, who both live there, and the plane, well, that’s my toy.”

“You’re a rich rancher; that’s who I want to be when I grow up.”

He glanced down at my breasts.

“You look fully grown to me.”

“Only on the outside, on the inside I’m a kid who wants to spend her life around horses.”

“So, why don’t you?”

“I want them to be my horses, on my ranch.”

“Is that your dream?”

“Yeah, what’s yours?”

He stared into my eyes. “I want to meet the right woman.”

~

WE WERE OUTSIDE in the diner parking lot, saying goodbye as we stood beside our vehicles.

Gary had an F-150 too, although his was red and much newer than mine.

“Goodnight, Blue, I guess we could call this a first date maybe?”

I shook my head. “Dinner is a date, not just coffee.”

“Well then, dinner it is, are you busy Saturday night?”

“No, and I look forward to it.”

A moment later and we were kissing. When our lips parted, we both smiled.

As I drove home, my phone rang. It was Gary.

“Missed me already?”

“As a matter of fact, yes, but I have something to tell you. Dr. Harold Weidman, Lucinda’s lover? The police just arrested him for Vinnie’s murder.”

I swung my truck into a tight U-turn and headed downtown. It looked like it was going to be a long night.

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THE DETECTIVES that were handling Lucinda's murder were also working the Vincent Caine and Sarah Miller murders, since the assumption was that they were connected.

They located Bobbi Reed at Parkland Memorial, where she said she had been since her shift started. When they told her about Caine's death, she smiled. They left the hospital, unconvinced of her innocence, but also unable to prove her involvement. They hoped to clear things up once they had a chance to study the hospital's surveillance video.

Next, they went to see Dr. Weidman, the dead man's rival in love. When they pulled up to the curb outside Weidman's home, the house was dark. As one of the detectives rang the doorbell to rouse the doctor, the other decided to look around the property. When he opened the lid on the garbage can at the curb, he saw a yellow plastic shopping bag lying on top. After putting on gloves, he lifted the bag and a .38 revolver fell out.

When Dr. Weidman finally made it to the door, he was dressed in robe and slippers and seemingly barely awake. The dentist soon found himself handcuffed and sitting in the back of an unmarked police car.

The two detectives assigned to the case were Dave Andrews and Diego Ramirez. Andrews was about forty, with a round belly and a wide face. I knew him some from earlier cases, and he was a good cop who always showed sympathy toward the victims' families.

I had known Diego since I was a kid. He and my older sister went to their senior prom together, and I was still friends with his brother.

I hung out with them in the squad room that night and listened in as they discussed the case. Neither man seemed convinced of Dr. Weidman's guilt. They both thought that finding the gun in the garbage can was a little too convenient. And as for Bobbi Reed, well, they were just waiting to see what the surveillance tapes revealed.

~

IT WAS NEARLY NOON the next day when the ballistic results came back. The gun that murdered Lucinda was the same gun that murdered her husband, and his Lolita.

Dr. Weidman hadn't been charged with murder yet but was being held for questioning. He vehemently denied his guilt and pointed out to the detectives that he had already been cleared of Lucinda's murder. At the time she was killed, he had been at a dental convention in Miami.

Then, the detectives asked the doctor for the name of his accomplice, and he demanded to see his lawyer.

Meanwhile, the hospital security video seemed to back-up Bobbi Reed. Although, surveillance was incomplete, because the three cameras around the loading dock area weren't working. In addition, there was a twenty-six-minute gap where she was out of camera view; she explained this by saying that at the time, she was outside on the loading dock, smoking, a definite no-no for someone fighting liver cancer.

I was going to miss my run with Becca, and so I gave her a call and filled her in on what was happening.

"So, when do I get to meet this Gary?"

"Whoa, Mom, it's too soon for that. We haven't even had a real date yet."

"Okay, but I want to meet him if it goes past a third date."

"It's a deal."

"Now, what about these murders, do you think the doctor did it?"

"No, and despite what Gary thinks, I can't buy Bobbi Reed as a triple murderer."

"Well, whoever did it would have to of known about the girl, Sarah? Who knew about her besides Bobbi Reed?"

I thought about that, and when the answer came to me, I nearly dropped my phone.

~

RACHEL REED LOOKED every bit the innocent. Her big blue eyes widened as I entered the trailer with the two homicide detectives, Dave Andrews and Diego Ramirez. Accompanying us, were four police officers and a police psychiatrist named Debra Walker. Two of the officers wore their standard dark blue uniforms, but the other two were dressed in gray coveralls.

Bobbi Reed spread her arms wide.

"I figured you'd be by sooner or later, so go ahead, search all you want. I didn't kill anybody, and I've got nothing to hide."

Diego handed her the warrants.

"These officers will search, and while they do that, ma'am, would you mind if we sat and talked?"

"Talked about what?"

Rachel's eyes followed the two officers in coveralls as they went outside.

"Why are those two leaving?"

"Oh, they're not leaving," Diego said. "They'll be searching outside, even crawling under the motor home."

Rachel sent him a shaky smile and sat on the couch beside her mother.

As we all settled in, Detective Andrews took out a notebook and read from it.

"Mrs. Reed, did you know that Dr. Weidman's home is only a short drive from the hospital?"

"Yes, I mean, Lucinda took us there to meet him once, when things got serious between them."

"Do you own a firearm, ma'am?"

"Yes, I have a gun; it's an old .38 my husband bought at a gun show years ago. It's in a shoebox at the back of my closet."

Detective Andrews hollered, "Miller?" and one of the officers stuck his head out of the bedroom.

"Yes sir?"

"Have you guys come across a gun in a shoebox, probably in the closet?"

"We found a shoebox, but there were only a few loose shells rolling around in it, no gun."

"Thank you," Andrews said, and the cop went back to searching.

Bobbi Reed sat with an open mouth. "My gun is gone?"

One of the cops in coveralls came inside carrying a duffel bag. He spoke to Diego.

"We found this in the trunk of that rusted Beetle."

Diego put on a pair of latex gloves, then he opened the bag and began to empty it of its contents. He took out toys, hair ribbons with ponies on them, ticket stubs from concerts that happened years ago, preteen-sized skirts and tops that, if worn, would be very revealing. As he dug deeper into the bag, he came across a nightie that was nothing short of X-rated. It was scarlet red and void of material in the most interesting places.

"Mrs. Reed, do you recognize any of these articles, ma'am?"

Bobbi Reed shook her head as she stared over at her daughter.

"No, I've never seen them before."

When Rachel spoke, it was almost a whisper. "They're mine, put them back."

Diego continued to search. From a pocket on the outside of the bag, he found the pictures.

I could tell from the look on his face that our worst fears had been confirmed. He stood and looked through them slowly, as Detective

Andrews, and Debra Walker, the police psychiatrist, peered over his shoulder.

Diego then looked over at me and mouthed two words. “It’s bad.”

I later learned that they were all photos of Rachel. In the earliest of the pictures, Rachel couldn’t have been more than five. In the latest, she looked as she did now. But there were other photos of the years in between, and in each photo, she was nude.

Debra Walker beckoned for Bobbi to join them, and Diego went through the photos again.

Bobbi viewed the evidence of her daughter’s molestation, as tears fell from her eyes.

“Oh God, oh Vinnie you miserable prick, not my baby too, not my baby.”

Rachel looked at the floor as she spoke. “I wasn’t molested; Vincent loved me. He always loved me, not Lucinda, and that slut Sarah was nothing to him. He loved me, me! He only stayed with Lucinda all those years because it made it possible for us to be together, and… and I loved him too.”

“If you loved him, then why did you murder him?” Diego asked.

Bobbi turned away from the obscene photos and settled back onto the sofa.

“What… what did you say?”

“Your daughter killed Vincent Caine and Sarah Miller, and, I’m sorry to tell you this, ma’am, but she also killed her sister. If I had to guess, I’d say it was because Lucinda found these photos and threatened to have Vincent arrested. Rachel murdered Caine and Sarah Miller out of jealousy.”

Bobbi turned her head and stared at Rachel as if she were looking at a deformed stranger. Afterwards, she fell back against the couch in a near faint.

Debra Walker went to Bobbi and took her pulse.

“Will someone please get her a glass of water?”

I walked toward the kitchen area to grab a bottle of water from the refrigerator. As I moved past her, I stared at Rachel Reed. I was certain she was a murderer three times over, but those big blue eyes and perfectly dimpled cheeks still made her look angelic.

As Bobbi took the water from me, she reached for her purse, then removed a pill bottle.

“My medicine,” she said, “Let me take my medicine and then we’ll talk.”

After she had swallowed the pills, she placed a hand lovingly against Rachel’s cheek.

“I love you, baby; everything is going to be okay.”

Rachel sent her a weak smile.

Afterward, Bobbi stared at Diego. “I confess. I killed my daughter, Vincent, and that Sarah girl. I killed them all and my Rachel had nothing to do with it.”

Diego sighed. “Mrs. Reed, I appreciate the fact that you want to protect your daughter. However, it’s not possible for you to have killed Vincent Caine and to have also planted the murder weapon at Dr. Weidman’s home. We checked, and you just wouldn’t have had enough time. Plus, you didn’t even have a vehicle; your daughter drops you off at night and picks you up in the morning, which gave her plenty of time in between to commit the crimes.”

“The bakery delivers to the hospital cafeteria every night, and the driver always talks a while with the girl on the night shift. While he was inside, I stole his van and committed the murders.”

“We talked to the driver; in fact, he confirms that you were smoking out at the loading dock during the time you were away from the cameras.”

“He’s lying. I did it. I used his delivery van, caught every light green, and made it back before I was missed.”

Detective Andrews shook his head. “No ma’am, I’m afraid not,” He then stared down at Rachel. “Miss Reed, please come with us to the station; I think we need to talk.”

Bobbi Reed slumped back on the couch. “Are you people deaf? I said that I confess to everything. I killed my daughter, I killed Vinnie and I killed Sarah Miller.”

“Sorry ma’am, but I just ain’t buyin’ it,” Andrews said. “I think you would do anything to protect your daughter.”

Bobbi smiled a lazy smile.

“It’s a death bed confession; you have to believe it.”

“I know about your health problems, and I’m sorry about that, but you’re still a ways from passing on.”

“Detective, did you know that I’ve worked at the same hospital for over twenty years?”

“No, ma’am.”

“It’s true, and I could have worked on any shift I wanted, so why do you think I chose to switch to the night shift three weeks ago?”

“Yes, why would you do that?” Diego said, as he moved closer to her.

We all waited to hear the answer, but Bobbi seemed to be slipping off to sleep; then, with a jerk, she came back.

“I worked the night shift… because it’s much easier then… to steal from the pharmacy, and I never had any intention of dying while suffering.” She looked over at Rachel. “I love you so much, baby, put… put all this behind you and have a good life.” Then, Bobbi’s eyes rolled back, and her head lolled over.

“Pharmacy?” I said. “Oh God, what she swallowed, that wasn’t medicine; it was poison!”

Andrews cursed, then called for an ambulance, as Dr. Walker worked on reviving Bobbi.

Within the hour, Bobbi Reed was pronounced dead.

~

TWO WEEKS LATER, Gary and I were having Sunday brunch at a little bistro in Dallas.

“So, Rachel Reed just walks away, huh?”

Gary nodded. “The D.A. says that Bobbi Reed’s confession is good enough for her, and besides, she’s in a tight race. If they tried Rachel and she walked, it could tank the D.A.’s bid for reelection.”

“Rachel Reed murdered those people, not Bobbi,” I said.

“Rachel’s lawyer, Sam Coulton, he had his investigators do a reenactment of Vinnie’s murder, and yes, if every light were green and Bobbi Reed drove like an absolute madwoman, she would have had just enough time to commit the murders and plant the gun at the doctor’s.”

“Where is Rachel now?”

“Off to live with relatives of her late father, at least until she turns eighteen.”

“That girl, as innocent as she appears, is a murderer.”

“I agree, but, the law says different,” Gary said, and then he leaned across the table and kissed me. “No more shop talk, besides, I want to ask you a question.”

“Ask away.”

“I’m going out to the ranch next weekend; would you like to come along?”

“Absolutely, I can’t wait to see it.”

“We’d ah, we’d be staying all weekend, overnight, you know?”

I grinned. “I look forward to it.”

Gary smiled back and took my hand.

“Blue Steele, what a tough name for such a sweet woman.”

“The people I catch don’t think I’m sweet.”

“I don’t know; I think you may have captured me.”

“Really? Well then, what’s the bounty?”

Gary sighed. “The slightly used heart of a lonely man,”

I gave his hand a squeeze.

“I’ll take it.”

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Part 2

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I LEANED BACK in the passenger seat of the pickup truck as we headed toward hell, I mean home.

I glanced over at Gary and shook my head, a boyfriend, I had an actual boyfriend, and unlike the last few, I liked this one. Now don't get me wrong, I liked all my boyfriends, at first.

But sooner or later, usually sooner, one of us, all right, *I*, would get bored, or feel penned in, or just become afraid of being tied down to someone forever. So far, I've felt none of that with Gary.

A defense lawyer? How did I wind up dating a defense lawyer? I asked myself. And then Gary turned his head and smiled that sexy smile at me and I knew how I wound up dating him.

The man was a hunk.

"Blue?"

I snapped out of my woolgathering.

"Huh?"

"You're not nervous, are you?"

"About you meeting my family? No, but like I said earlier—"

"I know, you said that your mother has no filter on her mouth, that whatever she thinks, she says."

"Well, it's true, and my sister is—"

"Overly friendly and highly competitive,"

"No, my sister is a spoiled brat who can't stand it when I have something she doesn't, including men. I could give you the names of at least three boyfriends she's stolen away from me over the years."

"Well, don't worry; no matter how many times I sleep with her, I'll always come back to you."

"What?"

"Blue, it was a joke, calm down."

I pointed to the shoulder of the road. "Pull over, please?"

Gary drove his pickup over to the side of the road and shut off the engine. Afterward, he turned in his seat and looked at me expectantly.

"Blue?"

"I don't want to lose you, Gary. I know we've only been dating for a few weeks, but, my family, all kidding aside, they can be difficult, and I don't want them to scare you off."

"Blue, baby, I can handle your mom and your sister, believe me.

I'm only tagging along because I couldn't stand the thought of being without you for three days."

I kissed him.

"It's no wonder you win most of your cases; you always know the right thing to say."

Gary stared at me with a question on his lips, but then stayed silent.

"What? What were you going to say?"

"I have a confession to make."

"Yes?"

"I went on the internet last night and researched your dad. It's just that you never talk about him and now that we're going to see your family, I thought that—"

"It's okay," I said, cutting him off. "I find it difficult to talk about him; it always brings back bad memories."

"I can understand that, I mean the not knowing, it must be hard."

"I should have told you, especially now, in fact, I'm only going home because it's his birthday; it's become a tradition. My mother insists that we gather around his birthday."

"It makes sense to me, as a way to honor him, and you know what?"

"What?"

Gary took my hand. "This year you don't have to face it alone."

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"Just thank you."

"Well, you're welcome," Gary said, and then he pulled back onto the road.

~

MY DADDY, the original Blue Steele, was a Texas Ranger, as was his daddy, and his daddy, and his daddy.

When I was seventeen, my father went missing while investigating a serial killer.

Daddy was convinced that one man had been killing across the country for over five decades without being detected. The means he used to kill, as well as the victims he chose, were so varied, that the experts attributed the deaths to multiple persons.

To this day, no one knows what became of my father, and his theory of a "Herd Thinner" as it came to be called, was greatly discounted by experts. My father had many friends, Texas Ranger Deke Thomas, was among them. They had all searched for clues to my father's whereabouts and for proof that the man he'd pursued wasn't

just a figment of his imagination.

Now, over ten years later, Daddy is listed as missing, presumed dead, and the man he sought, his "Herd Thinner", if he existed, would likely be well into his eighties, or dead.

~

GARY TURNED off the highway and headed down the gravel road that led to my family home.

We were in Landsville, Texas. Landsville was a small town just outside of Garland, where my father had been stationed with the Texas Rangers' Company B Headquarters.

The town was mostly farm and ranch land with a small downtown area that now boasted its own McDonald's, and the movie theater had recently begun opening seven days a week. It was a great town to grow up in, and despite the angst of family tension, I was glad to be home.

Gary drove past the barn and parked in front of the garage. Before he could even turn off the engine, my mama and sister came out to greet us.

My sister Jenny and I had both gotten our long dark hair from our mama, only now, Mama's hair was a luminescent white that hung about her smiling face like a snowy mane. Her blue eyes sent me a twinkle and then immediately began assessing Gary.

My sister was also staring at Gary, while smiling a predatory grin. My sister is two years older than I am, but other than her blue eyes, we look like twins. When she had given Gary the once over, she turned her gaze on me and smiled.

"Welcome home, Blue, and who's the hunk?" Jenny said.

I ignored her and gave my mama a hug. Although coming home was always stressful, I loved my mama to death and suddenly realized how much I had missed her.

"Hey, Mama, how you been?"

She smiled at me as she caressed my cheek. "I've been good, girl, but look at how skinny you are. Well, I'll fix that; I'll put five pounds on you before you leave." And then she looked at Gary. "This must be Gary; he's a little old for you, ain't he? How old are you, mister?"

Gary didn't even blink. "I'm forty."

"Forty? Well hell, that's pushin' the envelope, but you are a sexy devil, I'll give you that."

"Are you flirting with me, ma'am?"

"Am I…?" Mama said, and then she laughed. "No, son, I'm too old for that nonsense. Hell, if I want a man I just tell him so."

Gary smiled. "A plainspoken woman, I like that."

“How do you feel about my daughter?”

“I like her a great deal.”

“In the sack or out of it?”

“Both,” Gary said, without the trace of a blush, although I could feel my cheeks redden.

“Well, you treat her good out of the sack and she’ll treat you good in it; we Steele women know how to take care of a man.”

Jenny sidled up against Gary then.

“All us Steele women know how to treat a man right. Hi, I’m Jenny.”

“It’s nice to meet both of you ladies, but why don’t we go inside? I don’t know about Blue, but I could use a drink of water.”

“Or something stronger,” I mumbled.

Just as we reached the top of the porch steps, a car traveled up the long driveway and came to a sliding halt beside Gary’s truck. It was the sheriff’s car, behind it, followed a patrol car.

County Sheriff Matt Walker had been sheriff for as long as I could remember, although he was only in his early fifties. He had taken the job over from his father, Joe Walker, who had died from cancer. Joe Walker had been a legend in these parts, and even had a street in town named after him.

Matt Walker was a tall, thin man with a no-nonsense face and short blond hair turning gray. After exiting his cruiser, he came over to us, with one of the deputies following behind. The other deputy, a boy I grew up with named Billy Joe Tently, looked about the property.

The sheriff tipped his hat at my mother. “Howdy, Maggie,” Next, he spotted me and broke out in a smile. “Well I’ll be, little Blue, how you doin’ there, girl?”

I walked over and kissed him on the cheek.

“I’m fine, Sheriff, and it’s good to see you again, but hey, what brings you out here?”

Sheriff Matt ducked his head and sighed.

“I’m sorry to say it’s official business,” he said, and stared at Jenny. “Miss Steele, do you know a man by the name of Thomas Hayes?”

Jenny grinned. “Tommy? Yes, he’s my boyfriend.”

“When was the last time you saw him?”

“Last night, we had dinner in Garland and… then we went back to his place.”

“And what time did you leave?”

Jenny’s eyes looked up, as she thought about it.

“I guess it was around two a.m.”

Mama snorted. “Two a.m.? The boy’s got more stamina than I would have given him credit for.”

Jenny frowned at her.

"We fell asleep while watching a movie, Mama. Sheriff, what's this about?"

"I'm sorry to tell you this, Jenny, but Tommy Hayes is dead."

Jenny shook her head violently. "What?"

"Yes, he was stabbed through the heart; the coroner places the time of death at around two a.m."

"Tommy, dead? Wait… you think I killed him?"

"I don't think anything yet," Sheriff Matt said.

Billy Joe called over from the side of the barn; he was standing beside Jenny's car, an old green Chevy Impala.

"We got a bloody knife here on the passenger seat, Sheriff."

"What knife?" Jenny said. "There's no knife in my car."

The sheriff's phone beeped and he checked it. After giving it a perturbed look, he held it up so that we could all look at it. Billy Joe must have taken a photo of the car and sent it to him. The picture showed the inside of Jenny's car, lying on the passenger seat was a knife that looked like a switchblade; it was covered in blood.

The sheriff called over to his deputy.

"Billy Joe, stay with the car while we head back to town. I'm going to see about getting a warrant. I want everything by the book on this one, and oh yeah, stop sending me stuff on the damn phone. There's nothing wrong with my legs, I could have just walked over there and looked in. Miss Jenny, I need you to come to the station with me so we can talk, and uh, you might want to have a lawyer handy."

I spoke to him. "There's more, isn't there, Sheriff? I can tell by the look on your face."

"We have witnesses, Blue, and that's all I'm gonna say for now."

Gary stepped forward.

"Hello, Sheriff, my name is Gary Dent. I'm Blue's boyfriend and now… I guess I'm also Jenny's attorney."

"All right, then why don't you follow us back into town. Jenny, you'll be riding with me."

The other deputy took out a set of handcuffs and Jenny blanched. The sheriff raised a hand and spoke up.

"Put those cuffs away, Bob, there's no need for them, right, Jenny?"

"Yes," Jenny said, as she looked like she might cry at any moment.

Sheriff Matt offered his arm and then he escorted Jenny to his car.

With Mama sitting in the back seat of Gary's pickup, we followed the police cars out to the highway.

"Mr. Gary?" Mama said.

Gary looked at her in the rear-view mirror.

"Yes ma'am?"

“Guilty or not, you get my girl free, you hear me?”

“Guilty or not, yes ma’am.”

“Well, all right then,” Mama said, and off we went to the police station.

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ACCORDING TO MAMA, Jenny had been dating Tommy Hayes for over six months, a record for my sister.

Tommy had been a reporter, based out of Dallas, and as far as Mama knew, he never had a problem with anyone.

When we arrived at the local police station, Gary followed the sheriff and Jenny into an interrogation room.

The police station was in a massive old building that also housed the courthouse and licensing bureaus. Despite its gray stone exterior, the inside was modern, thanks to a renovation three years earlier.

Mama and I sat for hours on a wooden bench while sipping on vending machine coffee. After what seemed like forever, Gary walked over and sat beside us.

"They're booking her on suspicion of murder, chiefly because of the knife found in her car. DNA results on the blood aren't in yet of course, but the blood type matches the victim, Tommy Hayes."

"What's Jenny's story?" I said.

"She says he was fine when she left him. Tommy walked her out to her car and she drove off. She has no idea how the knife got into her car, and oh, they searched the house and removed all of Jenny's clothes, plus her car. She'll be arraigned in the morning. If they find any more evidence, they may up the charge to murder."

"Mama," I said. "Does Jenny ever lock her car?"

"No, there's no need, and you're thinking that somebody planted that knife, aren't you?"

"Yes, Jenny wouldn't kill anybody, and if she did, she'd be smart enough to get rid of the murder weapon."

"That's what I think too," said a voice from the doorway. We all looked up to see Sheriff Matt enter the room.

Mama walked over to him.

"If you think my girl is innocent, then why are you keeping her here?"

"Maggie, I have to go where the evidence takes me, despite how I feel."

"Sheriff," I said. "You said there were witnesses, who are they?"

"It's Doc Monroe and Emma Cole."

Mama hung her head. "Oh, Lordy."

“What am I missing?” Gary said. “I take it that Doc Monroe is a doctor of some kind, but who is Emma Cole?”

I answered him.

“Doc Monroe isn’t a doctor, he’s *the* doctor. He’s about eighty, highly respected, and he must have delivered nearly every baby in this town, including the three of us.”

“And Emma Cole?”

“She’s the mayor, and her late husband’s family founded the town.”

Gary sighed. “I suppose they’d have no reason to lie.”

“Doc said he saw Jenny and Tommy fighting,” the sheriff said. “Doc said it was loud enough to wake him up. His house is directly across from the Martin place; Tommy rents the apartment over the Martin’s garage.”

“What about the Martins?” I said. “If a fight were loud enough to wake Doc, then it would have woken them up too, what do they say?”

“No one was home, they’re on vacation.”

“And Emma Cole, what’s her story? Why would the mayor be up at two a.m.?”

“Emma suffers from insomnia. When she can’t sleep, she goes out for a drive. She says she saw Jenny at a stop light by the convenience store on Main Street. Emma said that Jenny had blood on her face and wouldn’t look at her. When the light changed, Jenny sped off.”

“What’s Jenny say about all this?” I said.

“She denies everything, says there was never a fight, no knife and no blood, says she doesn’t know why Doc and the mayor would say what they’re saying.”

Mama shook her head slightly.

“None of this makes sense.”

“Well, it could,” Sheriff Matt said.

Mama stared at him. “How’s that?”

“Maybe, just maybe Jenny suffered a break of some kind, a mental break. If she murdered Tommy in a fit of rage or jealousy, she may have blocked it from her mind.”

“That’s crazy!” Mama shouted.

“Crazier than Doc and the mayor making up stories to frame her? Why would they lie, Maggie?” the sheriff said.

“I don’t know,” Mama said quietly.

I didn’t know either, but if they were lying, I was going to find out why.

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MAMA and I were allowed to visit with Jenny in a small, windowless room. I was surprised to see her dressed in what looked like a set of orange hospital scrubs, but then I realized that they would have taken her clothes for processing.

Jenny sent us a weak smile as we settled across from her at a gray metal table.

"I didn't do it," she said.

"Tell us what you remember about last night," I said. "Did anything out of the ordinary happen? Was Tommy worried about anything, maybe afraid of something?"

"No, actually, he was in a very good mood. He said the story he was working on was about to break open."

"What story?"

"I don't know, but Tommy wasn't a crime reporter or anything, he wrote for the Lifestyle section, plus the occasional human interest story."

"That doesn't sound like an area where a story could 'break open'; maybe he was working on something more serious."

Jenny began to cry and Mama reached over and held her hand.

"What is it, baby?"

"Tommy, I was falling in love with him, Mama. Goddamn whoever killed him; I hope they rot in hell."

"First, we have to figure out who that is," I said. "What do you remember about your ride home?"

"It was quiet; I didn't see another car until I reached the highway. I don't know why Doc would say Tommy and I fought, and the mayor, she was nowhere in sight, but why would they lie? I don't understand why they would lie about me."

I stared at Jenny.

"Hey, Jen, think hard before you answer me, but are you certain that you remember the ride home?"

Jenny screwed up her face in thought.

"Yes, I remember Tommy kissing me goodbye. I remember sitting at that damn long light on Maple Street, and then heading up the ramp and merging onto the high—"

"Maple Street? You took Maple Street home, not Main Street?"

“Yeah, I know it’s a little longer drive, but it puts you up farther along the highway, why?”

“The mayor claims she saw you on Main Street, not Maple.”

“Well then she’s definitely lying. Even if I somehow missed seeing her, she couldn’t have seen me on Main Street; I was never there.”

“I need to go have a talk with Doc and the mayor,” I said.

Billy Joe Tently stuck his head in the room. He was a muscular man of average height with a toothy grin. He was the youngest of seven brothers and his father had been my math teacher in high school. One thing about growing up in a small town is that you know just about everyone’s history.

“Time’s up, ladies, but you’ll be able to see her again in the morning.”

I smiled. “Okay Billy Joe, but just give us a second, huh?”

He smiled back, “Sure thing, Blue; I’ll be right down the hall.” and then he took out his phone and fiddled with it.

After Billy Joe left, I spoke to Jenny.

“Hey, big sis, we’re gonna get you out of here, you got that?”

“How?”

I stood up. “Don’t you worry about how, just believe me when I say it’s gonna get done.”

Jenny and Mama stared up at me with their mouths open.

“What?”

Mama grinned. “Damn girl, for just a second there, it sounded like your daddy was talkin’”

~

GARY and I got to Doc’s house just as the last patient of the day was leaving. Doc was semi-retired, but still saw the occasional patient; usually they were old friends of his.

As I rang the doorbell, a new BMW parked at the curb, it was Mayor Cole. Emma Cole had to be nearing eighty, but thanks to plastic surgery, she could pass for sixty. She left the car and walked over to us.

“Blue, dear, I heard you were back in town, I’m so sorry that it had to be under such horrible circumstances.”

“Hello, Mayor, are you certain that it was my sister you saw last night?”

Her face darkened. “I don’t want to talk about that; it’s a police matter.”

“Police matter? Mayor, this is my sister’s future we’re talking about.”

The door opened and Doc Monroe stood there staring at us.

“Come on in, Emma, and Blue, I have nothing to say to you, like Emma said, it’s police business.”

“Doc, what the hell is going on; why won’t you talk to me?”

The mayor brushed by me and entered the house, then, she swiveled about and pointed a finger at me.

“Leave Blue, or we’ll call the sheriff and he’ll make you leave.”

And then the door shut in my face.

Gary looked at me and grinned.

“I see it’s true what they say about small town folk being friendly.”

“It’s not funny. The mayor’s always been a bit of a cold fish, but Doc? Doc Monroe is one of the friendliest people I know.”

“Not anymore,” Gary said. “And I’ll tell you something else.”

“What?”

“He wasn’t just rude, he looked scared.”

~

WE LEFT Doc’s and drove into Dallas.

After a short wait, Gary and I spoke to Ray Kurtz. Kurtz was Tommy Hayes’ editor. We talked with him in a small break area behind the newsroom. The clickety-click of numerous people typing at once, even on modern keyboards, still carried into the room.

“I’m just sick about Tommy, Miss Steele, but I have no idea what story he could have been working on. Tommy worked the Lifestyle section mainly, with now and then, a human interest story.”

“What sort of human interest stories?”

“Oh, you know, like when a lost child is found safe, or a bum on skid row inherits a fortune, stuff like that. I believe the last story he did was about a guy celebrating his 100th birthday at the nursing home.” Kurtz suddenly looked thoughtful. “You know, come to think of it, Tommy did tell me that something interesting happened at the home that day. When I asked him what it was, he told me that he’d get back to me after he checked some things out.”

“How long ago was this?”

“Two days ago, the name of the nursing home is Avalon Health; it’s over on Burgoyne Avenue.”

~

WE GRABBED a quick bite at a diner, while on our way over to the home.

While Gary checked in with his office, I gave my best friend, Becca, a call.

“Wow Blue, that doesn’t sound like Doc at all.”

“I know, I think he’s afraid of something, or somebody.”

“Well girl, you tell Jenny that I said to hang in there, the truth will come out eventually.”

“Oh, it’ll come out all right, even if I have to drag it out by its tail.”

Becca laughed, then asked me a question.

“How’s Gary getting along with your mama?”

“Great, she didn’t faze him in the least.”

“I think you’ve got a good one there, Blue, you know?”

I leaned away from the table and lowered my voice.

“Yeah, I know, but, it’s still early, I mean we’ve only been together for a few weeks.”

“If it counts any, I vote you keep him.”

“It counts, and I’ll keep that in mind.”

~

THE ADMINISTRATOR of the nursing home was a middle-aged woman with her hair in a severe bun. She was a good-looking woman, but her demeanor told you that she was one tough cookie. At first, she seemed reluctant to let us talk with the staff, but after Gary poured on the charm, she was ready to give us a tour.

I left Gary alone with her to keep her busy, while I talked with the caregiver who had shown Tommy around. Her name was LaShonda Miller, and she had a gold cross pinned to her sweater.

“It was Mr. Geary who had the 100th birthday, but honestly, Mr. Hayes seemed more interested in Mr. Blaine; he talked to him for hours that day.”

“Who’s Mr. Blaine?”

“Andrew Blaine, he’s 88 and suffering from Alzheimer’s, he’s in the early stages though, so he has good days now and then. It helped him find Jesus, that’s one good thing that came out of it.”

“Is today a good day or a bad day?”

LaShonda smiled. “Let’s find out.”

~

ANDREW BLAINE WAS LYING in bed wearing a robe. In a corner of the room, a TV was playing religious programming. And thankfully, he was having a good day mentally.

“Tommy Hayes, Lord yes I remember him, good boy, and I swear he’s the spittin’ image of my kid brother Albert, only Albert died years ago, in Korea.”

I pulled a chair close to the bed and sat.

“What did you two talk about, sir?”

“Not to be disrespectful, ma’am, but that’s between me and Tommy, but don’t worry, once he writes his story, the whole world will know.”

I told him about Tommy then, and he seemed to shrink inside himself. A moment later, he mumbled something.

“I’m sorry sir, I couldn’t hear you; what did you say?”

He lifted his head and stared at me with young blue eyes trapped in an ancient face.

“I said the bastards killed him.”

“What bastards?”

Blaine reached over to his bedside table and grabbed a bible.

“Their day of reckoning has come. Listen up, missy; I’m about to tell you a story.”

And he sure did. When he was done, I was certain I knew who killed Tommy Hayes, and why.

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WE ARRIVED BACK in Landsville late in the evening, then Gary and I spent the night on our laptops doing research.

Mama got up early as usual and made us breakfast. Over coffee, I filled her in.

"That son of a bitch! I should get your daddy's old shotgun and put him in the ground."

"Whoa Mama, we've no proof; it's just a theory at this point, but once I confront him, we'll know if he's guilty or not."

"Your sister is being arraigned this morning at nine o'clock; we'll talk to him then."

I shook my head.

"*I'll* talk to him then. This could be dangerous, and if it is, I don't want you anywhere around."

"I know you're damn near as tough as your daddy, girl, but get some help, don't face him alone."

"I've already thought of that, and I'm waiting for a call back from the sheriff's department."

~

WE GOT to the municipal building at half past eight.

Sheriff Matt met me in an unoccupied courtroom and I repeated Andrew Blaine's story to him. When I was finished, he leaned back on the wooden railing of the witness box.

"Doc and the mayor, bank robbers?"

"Actually, it was an armored car. The heist took place just outside of El Paso, in 1953."

"And this Blaine, he claims to be one of the gang that Doc and Emma were a part of?"

"Yes, he and another man, it was the other man that planned the heist. Andrew Blaine was Emma Cole's boyfriend, of course, back then she was Emma Jameson. Emma, Doc, Blaine, and another man robbed over two hundred thousand dollars that day; they also killed the three guards inside the truck."

"This fourth perp, any idea who he was?"

"Yes, Blaine says he was the brains behind the heist, and also the

reason it worked so well."

"How do you mean?"

"The other man was a deputy sheriff; he flagged down the armored car by using his siren. When the driver lowered the window to talk to him, he shot him in the face. After that, Doc and Emma blocked the front, and with the patrol car blocking the rear, the remaining guards had nowhere to go."

Sheriff Matt got off the railing and stood up straight.

"And you say this happened in El Paso?"

"Yes, your father, Sheriff Joe, he was from El Paso, wasn't he?"

The sheriff let loose a heavy sigh.

"Goddamn it, Blue, why couldn't you just let it go? Your sister could have pleaded diminished capacity and been out in five years."

"And what about Tommy, Sheriff, will Tommy be back in five years?"

"I hated doing that, I really did, but the boy left me no choice. He had no clue who I was. He came and told me Blaine's story in the hope that I would help him identify the deputy from El Paso. Blaine couldn't remember his last name, only that his first name was Joe."

"You knew all this before he came to you, didn't you?"

"Yeah, my daddy confessed to me when he was dying. I told him it didn't make a bit of difference; every man does good and evil. A few years after that heist, daddy met my mama and stopped drinking; from that day forward, he did nothing but good. I'll be damned if I'll let anybody drag his name through the mud, anybody, Blue."

"So what are you going to do, Sheriff, kill me? It won't do any good, other people know about Andrew Blaine."

"Blaine's just a silly old coot with Alzheimer's, besides, Doc is on his way there now to… ease him to the other side. As for you, I guess I'll say that you were attempting to break your sister out."

"I'm not Tommy, Sheriff, I have a gun and I know how to use it."

"Little Blue, named after her daddy, are you as fast with a gun as he was? Well, I guess we'll find out."

"No we won't, Sheriff," said a voice from behind him.

It was Deputy Billy Joe Tently, I had told him my suspicions about the sheriff and he reluctantly agreed to hide himself beneath the judge's bench and listen in. Now, he stood behind his boss with his weapon drawn.

"Billy Joe, put down that gun."

Billy Joe shook his head.

"Afraid not, now take out your weapon slowly and lay it on the witness seat there."

The sheriff did as he was told and then smiled.

"This don't matter none, once Doc takes care of Blaine, it will all

just be hearsay."

Billy Joe smiled his big toothy grin. "No sir, we got you on film." He reached over and grabbed his phone off the bench. "And not only was it filming, but it also downloaded to my computer at home."

The sheriff made a pained expression.

"You and that goddamn phone, Billy Joe."

As Billy Joe led the sheriff away, I whipped out my own phone and called the nursing home. It took a minute, but I got them to understand the threat to them. They assured me that Mr. Blaine was safe, and that they were alerting security and calling the Dallas P.D.

I walked out of the courtroom and found Gary and Mama smiling at me.

Mama walked over and placed a hand on my cheek.

"You done good, girl."

"Thank you, Mama."

"Mr. Gary?"

"Yes ma'am?"

"Let's go get my other girl free like you promised me."

Gary offered her his arm.

"Yes ma'am."

"Well, all right then," Mama said, and off we went to get Jenny.

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Part 3

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I WAS at the Lone Star Mall.

Earlier, I had eaten lunch in the food court with Becca and her oldest daughter, Amy, who was eight-years-old.

Becca and Amy were browsing about the mall, while I sat in a chair at the salon getting ready to have my hair dried and my feet pedicured. It was Spoil Blue Day, a day I tried to celebrate at least twice a year.

I had a full schedule planned. After sleeping sinfully late, I drove to the mall and met Becca for lunch. After the salon, I planned to go home and veg out in front of the TV, and later, after a junk food dinner, I would indulge in ice cream, mint chocolate chip.

Gary was out of town on business and wouldn't be back for two days, so it was a perfect time to just sit back and relax. Of course, life had other plans.

The stylist was just about to place the dryer over my head when I heard the gunshots. I, along with the others in the shop, ran to the salon's front windows and looked out at the interior of the mall. We were on the ground floor of the three-story building, and in the middle of our section, there was a coin fountain. Past the stone fountain, on the other side of the mall, was a bank.

As we watched, three armed men in suits ran out of the bank and headed for the exit, the one in the lead was dragging a child along; the child was Amy.

I ran back to my pocketbook and grabbed my gun, a snub-nosed .38. As I did so, I shouted to the shop owner.

"Gloria, call 911, tell them that four men just robbed the bank, shots fired, hostage taken."

"I only saw three."

"There's a driver outside, trust me, they're not walking."

On my way out the door, I grabbed a scrunchie and tied my wet hair back in a ponytail.

As my bare feet slapped against the floor tiles, I maneuvered around groups of huddled shoppers and thumbed back the hammer on my gun.

When I heard more shots ring out, I came to a sliding halt in front of the bank, then watched as the robbers banged open the exit doors.

On the floor behind them were two bodies, a man and a woman, both mall security.

I raced toward the doors and made it outside just as the last robber was twenty feet from the getaway car. He was a behemoth and weighed three-hundred and fifty if he was a pound. It was no wonder that he was last to reach the car.

“Stop!” I called.

The man turned toward me with an Uzi in his right hand. I shot at him four times while still running. The first three shots missed high, but the forth one took the top of his head off in a spray of blood and brains. As he fell, he spun toward his own vehicle and the gun in his hand began to chatter.

The man sitting in the passenger seat ducked in time but the driver wasn’t as lucky. As he bent forward to avoid the errant shots, his seat belt held him in place, and multiple slugs caused him to dance in his seat. As the gun fell toward the ground along with its owner, it blew apart the right rear tire and etched a line of holes into the ground behind the car.

The man in the back seat scrambled out of the car with Amy and a black satchel, while his sole remaining companion followed behind.

“Let the girl go!” I shouted.

The man shoved Amy toward the other surviving man, then leaned over the trunk of the car.

As he opened up with his gun, I dived to the ground and rolled beside the dead man. He had fallen on his back when he died and his massive bulk made for a handy shield.

I lay as flat as I could as a dozen shots came my way. Many of them plunked into the corpse and at least one exited in a spray of blood. I was wearing a pair of cut-off jeans and the still warm blood splattered across my legs.

“Stop shootin’, you’re hittin’ Bobby,” the other man yelled.

I raised my head, risked a glance, and found that the men were running away, while dragging Amy along between them. Amy’s curly blonde hair floated behind her in the breeze. They were running toward the east end of the parking lot, where the highway was.

I stood to go in pursuit, and that’s when I heard my name called.

“Blue?”

It was Becca. She had a lump the size of a golf ball above her left eye and appeared to be on the verge of passing out, even so, I breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of her; until that moment, I didn’t know if the robbers had killed her.

“Blue they took Amy… they took Amy.”

I locked eyes with her.

“I’ll get her back; I swear it.”

Becca nodded slightly, then sank to the ground in tears.

I ignored my impulse to comfort her and ran after the robbers. As I threaded my way through the parking lot, I came upon shoppers hiding in their cars. Many of them held phones to their ears, undoubtedly calling 9-1-1. While the police would be a blessing, I also prayed that their arrival wouldn't escalate things into a hostage situation. I needed to get Amy away from her abductors before the situation got out of hand.

At the end of the parking lot was a rise of grass, twenty feet high, which took you up to the freeway. As the two men reached the top of the slope, one of them fired a shot in my direction. It blew the windshield out of a car thirty feet away from me. It was a weak one-handed shot and was probably only meant to slow me down.

As I started up the hill, they vanished from sight and I slipped and grunted my way up the grass. The morning dew remained and had made the grass slick; my bare feet only made the going tougher.

I was ten feet from the top when I heard shots, which was followed by screeching as a car came to a sudden stop. I made it to the top of the rise just as the robbers peeled away. They were in a Hummer of all things, a blue one. Its previous owner lay on the side of the road, he was unconscious, with blood running down his face.

The Thursday afternoon traffic was light and the carjacking had barely slowed down the flow.

I needed a ride. I ran out into the middle lane, gun at the ready and searched for the right vehicle. It came a second later in the form of a black Ford F350.

I fired one shot in the air and then stood sideways with the gun aimed at the speeding pickup. The truck slowed, but as it neared me, it veered to the right and skidded to a sideways stop. A moment later, I found myself face to face with the driver. His gun made the .38 I carried look like a popgun.

The man smiled, as he thumbed off the safety on the gun.

"Hey Chica, what's happenin'?"

~

"THERE!" I pointed. "The black Hummer in the middle lane."

"I see it," said the man in a calm voice, he was about thirty, swarthy and muscular.

"What's your name?"

"Call me Ramón," he said, with a slight Spanish accent.

"I'm Blue."

"The bounty hunter?"

"You've heard of me?"

“Yes, you once got to a man before I could.”

“You’re a bounty hunter too?”

He smiled, “Not exactly,” and then he looked down at my bloody legs. “There are some wipes in the glove box.”

I found the wipes and cleaned up, when I finished, I found Ramón staring at my legs.

“Eyes on the road, we can’t lose them.”

“Sorry, Chica, but you are a little distracting, you know?”

“I only know that my best friend’s daughter is in that Hummer with two crazed gunmen. Help me get her back and I’ll pose nude if you want.”

A smile formed on Ramón’s handsome face.

“I may hold you to that.”

We drove along, following behind the Hummer, while always keeping two or three cars between us. If they knew we were following, they didn’t show it. They just drove along in the middle lane while keeping with the flow of traffic.

I tapped my fingers on the door.

“I can’t believe you don’t have a phone.”

“I hate the damn things, besides, there’s no one I want to talk to.”

“I need to call the cops.”

“So, where’s your phone?”

“Back in the beauty parlor, along with my pocketbook, and my boots.”

“There’s a pair of flip-flops behind your seat, they’re better than nothing.”

I twisted in my seat and reached back to grab a pair of bright red flip-flops. I put them on even though I didn’t like them. I hate the feeling of having anything between my toes, but as Ramón said, they were better than nothing.

“Why are you helping me?” I asked.

“You said that these bastards took a kid; I hate anyone who messes with kids, plus, there’s the money they took.”

“That money belongs to the bank.”

“Finders keepers, Chica.”

Up ahead, the Hummer made a right, turned off the highway, and drove down a dirt road. Ramón pulled over to the shoulder and parked.

“What are you doing? We have to keep them in sight.”

“We will, but if we follow too closely they’ll hear us coming.”

He was right, but it was hard to sit by and do nothing, a moment later, he turned off the engine.

“Why did you do that?”

“Think about where we are. What’s on the other side of these

trees?"

We had followed the thieves along highway 31, headed west.

"The Trinity, the Trinity River is back there," I said.

"Correct, so this road must be the only way in or out, from here on in, it looks like we're on foot. If we go driving in there, they'll hear us for sure."

I opened my door.

"Let's go."

~

AS WE CREPT ALONG, it occurred to me that I had only one round left in my gun. However, Ramón's hand cannon, a .50 Desert Eagle, held eight rounds.

We walked down the narrow dirt road, staying to either side, so that we didn't make ourselves into one convenient target. As we walked, we listened for any sounds of movement or talking.

We had only gone about a hundred yards when we heard the voices, two of them, arguing.

"She can identify us, Toby; do you want to spend the rest of your life in Huntsville?"

"Derek, she's just a kid."

We crept closer. Through a break in the trees, I could see the river calmly flowing by, a few steps more and I spotted the two men. The taller of the two had stringy blond hair and a goatee. His gun was out; it was hanging by his side. The other one stood before him, and from where I was, it looked as if Amy was trying to hide behind him.

"Move, Toby, it's gotta be done, so let me do it; we can't stay here all day. That damn Hummer might have GPS tracking and I ain't goin' to be here when the cops find it. Now move!"

The one called Toby was shoved aside, leaving Amy exposed.

"Ramón?"

"I got it," Ramón said, as he sighted down the barrel of his gun.

"Pull that trigger and you're a dead man," said a deep voice from behind us.

We both spun at the sound and, as he turned, Ramón was slammed on the side of the head with a shotgun. He fell limply to the ground. I brought my gun up to fire and the man whipped the shotgun back around and knocked the weapon out of my hand with the barrel.

Pain shot through my arm from my fingertips to my elbow and I wondered if he had just broken my hand.

The other two men came running over with Amy being pulled along. They stared down at us.

The one named Derek glared at me.

“It’s the bitch from the mall, the one that killed Bobby.”

Amy looked over at me with tears in her eyes.

“Aunt Blue?”

I smiled at her. “It’s okay, baby, Aunt Blue’s come to take you home.”

A second later, the shotgun rushed toward my face, and everything went black.

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I AWOKE to find my wrists and ankles bound with plastic restraints, while my head was on fire with pain. Beside me, Ramón was still unconscious, and also restrained. Beyond him was Amy, huddled in a corner of the van. Her arms wrapped around her knees as she hugged herself.

We were in a panel van with a plywood floor and blacked-out side and rear windows. From up front in the cab, I could hear murmured voices.

"Amy," I whispered.

Her eyes grew wide in the ambient light and she crawled over to me.

"Aunt Blue."

"Hey baby, how you doin'? Those men didn't hurt you any, did they?"

"No, but they're scary."

"I know baby, and I know things look bad right now, but I'll get you back to your mommy as soon as I can, okay?"

She nodded, then winced while staring at me.

"What's wrong?" I said.

She pointed at my face. "Your left eye, it's closed, and kinda purple."

I forced a smile. "I'll be fine in a few days."

Just then, Ramón stirred.

"Oohhh, what happened?"

"We got outflanked."

"Oh," Ramón said, and then he smiled at Amy. "Hey there, little one, what's your name?"

"I'm Amy."

"I am Ramón, Amy; and it is very nice to meet you. I would shake your hand, but I'm a little tied up right now."

Amy actually grinned.

Ramón smiled back, and a moment later, the van made a sharp left. Four minutes passed, and then we stopped.

After the passenger doors opened and shut, we heard brief footfalls, then the side door of the van slid open. I had thought that the windows were blacked-out, but was now shocked to see that it

was nighttime, the only light came from a crescent moon. Ramón and I must have been unconscious for hours. If we had been on the road all that time, then God only knew where they had taken us. The one called Derek yanked first Ramón, and then me out of the van and onto hard packed earth, afterward, he glared in at Amy.

"Toby, why is this little bitch not tied up like the other two?"

The one called Toby walked over. He was a slightly built man with a round, boyish face and a tiny mouth. He spoke to Derek while looking at the ground.

"I didn't need to tie her up; she wasn't going anywhere, Derek."

Derek let out his breath in a huff and climbed in the van to restrain Amy, as the third man moved around to stare down at Ramón and me. He was about six feet tall, like Derek, but he carried an extra twenty pounds of muscle. His hair was short and as black as the night.

I looked about and saw nothing but flat land in all directions, but then to the west, I made out a small rectangle of light that must have been over a mile away. It might have been a lit window in a house, but in the darkness, any surrounding features were lost.

I looked back up, and the third man, the one who had wielded the shotgun, was staring at me. He was gazing down at me in a way that made the lecherous glance Ramón had given me earlier seem like a smile from a favorite uncle.

Ramón had been admiring me; this man was inventorying me. As his tongue crept out and wet his lower lip, I knew that he planned to do more than simply get rid of me.

The man stopped his staring and spoke.

"Derek, you and Toby take this dude and the kid and drop 'em in the old well out there."

The man then reached into a jacket pocket and took out a knife that looked like a switchblade; he held it up.

"Use your knife, you still got it?"

"Yeah," Derek said. "But why don't I just shoot 'em?"

The man pointed toward the light in the field, as the knife disappeared back into his pocket.

"The sound of the gun might carry, might not, but we don't need any lookie loos coming over to butt in, know what I mean?"

Derek nodded, "Okay, but what about her?"

The man smiled down at me. "She'll find her way to the bottom of that well soon enough, but it would be a damn shame to let a piece of ass like this go to waste. She and me, we're gonna spend a little quality time in the van first."

Ramón spat at the man, while shifting his feet beneath him.

"You are a piece of shit! What kind of man rapes women and harms children?"

The man wiped the spit off his chin, then reared back a foot to kick Ramón. Ramón launched himself at the man. The two of them slammed against the side of the van, before sliding down into the dirt.

Derek pulled Ramón off the other man and began kicking him repeatedly. I screamed at him to stop, while Amy began crying. Finally, the beating ended and Ramón rolled over to me. He was bleeding from his mouth and his nose. I knew the repeated kicks to his midsection must have caused damage, but when I looked into his eyes, he winked.

A second later, I felt something hard strike my thigh. When I looked down, I saw the knife, and realized that he had taken it from the third man's pocket as they struggled in the dirt.

I shifted over and plucked it from the ground. It took two tries though, because my hand was swollen from being swatted with the shotgun. I had just managed to palm the knife when the third man pulled me up on my feet by yanking on my ponytail. The next thing I knew, I was landing atop the plywood floor of the van.

"Remember, Derek, no guns, stick that pig with your knife until he begs you to stop and then cut his throat."

"My pleasure," Derek said. Then, I heard them moving away, toward the left.

I explored the knife with my thumb and found a button. I was right; it was a switchblade.

The man climbed in the van and turned to slide the door shut. The noise masked the small sound the blade made as it opened.

As tempting as it was to attack him then by kicking out at him, I knew it would end in defeat. If he cried out while his companions were still nearby, they would simply rush the van before I could even cut myself free. I had to bide my time, let them get out of hearing range, and then take-out this one and get to them before they could harm Amy or Ramón.

The man let out a low whistle.

"Damn, you are one sweet piece."

He reached out and ripped my top off. It was just a white, sleeveless cotton T-shirt, and it tore away easily as I struggled. The movements masked the effort I made to free my wrists of their bonds. Next, he tried to rip my bra in two, but the thick stitching of the middle part of the front stymied his efforts. He finally just broke the thin straps and pulled on it, until the hooks at the back gave way. He then tossed the new rag aside and gazed down at my breasts.

I asked him a question.

"Do you like what you're looking at?"

"Hell yes!"

"That's good, because they're the last things you're ever going to

see."

I thrust the knife under his chin and shoved it upward until the point of the blade pierced the flesh beneath his chin. As he opened his mouth to scream, I could see the long thin blade poking out of his ruptured tongue. It continued into the roof of his mouth.

He grabbed at me blindly. I had his head tilted back and his eyes were closed tight in reaction to the agony of the blade. I then twisted the knife hard and a choked cry issued from him that sounded more like a wheeze than a scream. Afterward, I withdrew the knife and shifted it around to cut the plastic restraints that bound my ankles. I nearly dropped it twice because my hands were wet from my attacker's blood.

It took me only a second to realize that by the time I restrained my attacker it would be too late for Amy and Ramón.

Meanwhile, the man had fallen out of the van and was crawling around in the dirt without purpose. I briefly wondered if the blade had somehow damaged his vision. In any event, he was no longer a threat.

I shuffled out of the van and searched the cab. On the passenger seat, I spied the shotgun. It was a 10 gauge with double triggers, lying beside it was the satchel full of money.

I grabbed the shotgun off the seat and used an end of it to blow the horn three times, praying that the unexpected sound would halt the planned violence taking shape out in the darkness. I scrambled beneath the van, as the sound of tentative footfalls reached my ears.

"Mike?" A voice whispered. "Mike, why did you blow the horn?"

Mike must be the name of my would-be rapist. He was wriggling near the van like a wounded worm, as a soft moan dripped from his shredded mouth.

A shape emerged from the deeper shadows, then three more. I was so happy to see that Amy and Ramón were unharmed that I nearly cried out in joy.

The first shadow grew closer. It was Derek. He had his gun out and was jerking his head this way and that, when he suddenly stopped and cried out.

"Mike! Shit man, what happened?"

As he walked closer, I took aim with the shotgun and pulled hard on the right trigger. The shot caught Derek in the chest and knocked him off his feet. The recoil nearly dislocated my shoulder, caused my ears to ring, and sent my already aching head to throbbing.

As I moved out from beneath the van, Ramón head-butted Toby and sent the little man sprawling on his ass. I passed Ramón the knife as I walked over and shoved the barrel of the shotgun against Toby's stomach.

I said, “Move and you’re dead.” At least I think I did, with the ringing in my ears, the only word I was able to make out was “dead.”

After cutting himself and Amy free, Ramón checked on Derek. He then looked over at me and shook his head. Afterward, he searched Toby for weapons and came up with my .38 and his Desert Eagle. He then took off his shirt and handed it to me. He was already a mass of bruises from the kicks he received.

“Not that I mind the view…” he said.

I snatched the shirt and wriggled into it; with all the chaos and adrenaline, I had forgotten I was topless.

Amy ran over and hugged me. “Are you all right, Aunt Blue?”

“I’m fine, baby, what about you?”

She nodded her head and pointed down at Toby.

“He wouldn’t let the other man hurt me.”

“That’s true,” Ramón said. “He had just shoved the other man away from her when you blew the horn.”

“Where the hell are we?” I asked Toby.

“Just south of Lubbock, off of route 87,” he said.

A moan came from behind us; it was Mike. I told Toby to get to his feet and to load Mike into the back of the van. He did as I said, then, Ramón secured both of them with plastic restraints discovered in the glove box.

After that, I found a cell phone in a cup holder.

“Hello?”

She sounded lost.

“It’s me, Becca, but hold on, someone wants to talk to you.”

I passed the phone to Amy and a few moments later, heard her say, “Don’t cry, Mama, I’m fine, Aunt Blue saved me.”

When Amy passed the phone back, Becca still sounded tearful.

“Thank you, Blue, oh God, thank you.”

“You’re welcome, but I didn’t do it alone; I had help from a mysterious stranger.” I said, and sent Ramón a wink with my one good eye.

Then, the police came on the line and I explained what had happened and told them our approximate location. They said they would send a cruiser and an ambulance to find us.

Ramón opened the satchel and looked inside.

“I don’t suppose you would let me slip away with this, huh Chica?”

I smiled. “Chico, you do whatever you want.”

He closed the bag up and sat it on the floor.

“Hey, Blue?”

“Yes?”

“You are one tough mama, you know that?”

I hugged Amy tighter and kissed the top of her head.

“I do what I have to do.”

“We all do, Chica, we all do,” Ramón said, and then he leaned back against the seat and went to sleep.

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Part 4

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I WAS WEARING a red dress and looking quite hot, if I do say so myself.

It was the kind of dress my mama would call haughty naughty and my daddy would have never let me leave the house in.

The dress made me feel like a tart and the high heels were killing my feet, but if I wanted to blend in with my surroundings, I couldn't wear my usual jeans and boots.

I was at the premiere for an art exhibit in the richest part of Fort Worth. I was playing bodyguard to a real estate investor named Ernesto Roberts. Ernesto had recently had a dispute with a land developer named Chaney who turned out to be mob connected. Chaney was not happy how things had turned out.

Words were exchanged, threats made, and three days ago, Ernesto's car had been destroyed by a homemade bomb that detonated when Ernesto started his car remotely. Had Ernesto started the car while inside it, he would have been killed instantly.

Ernesto went to the police and they told him that there was nothing they could do. There was no way to prove that the car had been bombed by Chaney. They also pointed out that had Chaney been the one who wanted him dead, then maybe he should count himself lucky that Chaney had failed. The thinking being that the failed attempt would make Chaney less likely to go after him a second time, now that the cops were looking at him.

Ernesto doubted that scenario, because the land deal that he had bested Chaney on was worth over three million. The destruction of an eighty-thousand-dollar car hardly seemed to even things out.

Even though Chaney vehemently denied having anything to do with trying to kill him, Ernesto expected trouble. That's why I was by his side.

Ernesto Roberts was wearing a two-thousand-dollar tux. He was fifty-four, divorced, with hair dyed dark and a face taut from strategic nips and tucks. I was twenty-eight and wearing a sexy dress and heels while walking at his side. We looked like nearly every other couple in the place, older man, younger woman.

While playing bodyguard was not my favorite work, I did take it on occasionally if the money was right. The money was very right this

time, and as the evening wore on and nothing happened, I began to think of it as easy money.

I should have known better.

When the trouble came, it had nothing to do with Ernesto. It came in the form of three armed and masked men dressed in black. The first one to enter fired a shot into the ceiling, while shouting, “Get down on the floor, now!”

When no one moved, so he shot the event’s lone security guard in the chest.

A second later, everyone was on the floor, and a great many of them were whimpering.

The shooter’s black T-shirt had a white number 1 on the front, while the other men wore the numbers 2 and 3 on theirs.

The shooter’s companions carried two duffel bags each, a red one and a blue one. As thug number 2 went right and number 3 left, we were instructed to throw our wallets and jewelry in the blue duffel and our phones in the red duffel.

I was down on the floor when thug number 2 approached Ernesto and me.

As I said, my dress was haughty naughty, and my girls were practically spilling out of it as I lay on the floor. Even as he gathered the belongings of the people near us, I could see the bandit’s eyes leering at my breasts. Meanwhile, my eyes were coveting the gun on his hip. Even from the small amount of it that I could see protruding from its holster, I could tell that it was a semi-automatic *Glock*.

When it was our turn to hand over our belongings, I tossed my phone in the red bag and sat up on my knees. The movement not only made my breasts jiggle, but now my face was also level with the thief’s crotch. As he gazed at me with a look of longing on his face, I reached into my purse as if to retrieve my wallet. Instead, I took out my .38, and shot him in the right leg.

The wounded man fell beside me. I used him as a shield as I yanked the gun from his holster and fired at the man who had shot the security guard. My second shot just missed hitting him in the head and he backed out into the hall.

As I ducked behind the man I had shot, I felt him tremble, even as a cry escaped him.

He had been hit by friendly fire, as the third man closed in steadily. I stuck my gun under the wounded man’s chin and backed up toward the rear hallway, where the rest of the guests were already fleeing in panic.

The third man seemed to have no regard for his partner, as he kept firing in our direction. My human shield was struck at least three times, and as his knees began to buckle, I struggled to hold him in

front of me.

It was a losing battle. The man outweighed me by eighty pounds and I was still holding a gun in each hand. I let go of the man, fired off a shot, and dived behind a statue. When I peeked out to see where my assailant was, I saw him running away with the two blue bags in his hand while the red bags with the phones were sitting abandoned on the floor.

Next, I heard the ping of the elevator, but when I reached the hallway, the elevator car was already at the basement level, where the cars were parked.

I rushed back inside and stared down at the dying bandit. He was lying in a spreading puddle of blood. I reached down and pulled the hood off his head and he gasped in pain. He was white and average looking, but his teeth were yellow.

"Who are your partners? Where can I find them?"

"The bastard who shot me; his name is Joe Cordell."

I saw movement from the right. It was Ernesto. He was creeping toward me with a fascinated, but frightened look on his face. Behind him, men and women peeked in from the hallway, and outside, came the sound of sirens.

"And what about the other man, the one who shot the guard?"

"He… he goes by the name Jones and you can find them at—"

The man went rigid as pain shot throughout his midsection. I counted four separate holes in his shirt and a large tear on his left side, where an exiting bullet caused most of his blood loss. As the light faded in his eyes, he got out his final words.

"The money is hidden… in car… three… near… the… brakes."

And then, he died.

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THE COPS ARRESTED two men who were leaving the building via the garage's exit ramp. Neither man was carrying a weapon or wearing a shirt with a number on it. One of them turned out to be Joe Cordell, who the dead crook had named as an accomplice.

Deke Thomas, a Texas Ranger and family friend, arrived on the scene and laid one of his massive hands on my shoulder.

"Hey, Blue, how you doing, girl?"

"I'm good, Deke, but the guard that got shot, how is he?"

"He's hanging in there; the paramedic says he thinks he'll make it."

He then gave me a good look and stared down his nose at me.

"That's some dress, Blue."

"I was just trying to blend in while I was playing bodyguard."

"Bodyguard?"

I explained to Deke why I was there and how the robbery went down. When I was done, he told me something that shocked me.

"Missing?" I said in surprise. "How could the bags be missing?"

"Not the bags, we found two blue duffel bags down in the garage. What we can't locate is the wallets and jewelry that was in them."

It was then that I remembered the dying man's last words.

"The one that I shot in the leg, he said that the money was hidden in car three, near the brakes."

"Yeah, that feller you were guarding, Ernesto Roberts, he said the same thing. We figured car number three must belong to the one that had the number three on his chest. We found nothing, but the car they were using to get away is headed to the police lab. If the goods are stowed away in that car somewhere, they'll find it. We're also searching every inch of that parking garage."

Ernesto was driven home by an officer while I went to the station to make out a statement. By the time I got home, I was so drained that I took a quick shower and went right to bed.

~

WHEN I AWOKE the next morning, I got dressed and met my boyfriend Gary for breakfast at a local bistro. It was Saturday, and the weather was beautiful, so we sat outside and ate.

Although Gary was twelve years older than I was, we still meshed well and were seeing more of each other. Besides being a lawyer, Gary was also a pilot. Last month he had flown us out to the ranch he owned with his brother and sister. I got along well with the family and his ranch was beautiful, just the kind of spread I hoped to own one day. The one point of contention between us was my work.

"So, once again you were shot at. There's got to be a safer way to make a living, Blue, no?"

"The last time I was shot at it had nothing to do with my work as a bounty hunter and neither did this robbery. I can take care of myself, Gary, believe me."

The last time I'd been fired at, I was attempting to get my best friend Becca's young daughter back from a gang of bank robbers that had taken her as a hostage. With the help of a man named Ramón, we not only got little Amy back, but also captured the bank robbers.

Gary reached across the table and took my hand.

"I know you can take care of yourself, but I still worry."

I smiled.

"It's nice to know you care so much."

My phone rang; it was Deke.

"We still haven't found the loot and the lab boys stripped that car down to its frame. We've also gone over the parking garage three times and come up empty."

"That's weird, Deke, where could they have hidden it?"

"We're still questioning them, but they're both playing dumb, which they're not. They both came back positive as having gunshot residue on them and they claimed it was because they went target shooting yesterday. Get this, they weren't lying, the guys at the gun club confirmed that they were there yesterday afternoon."

"They thought of everything, but if they hid that money then you'll find it eventually."

"We're beginning to think that there was a fourth man, one that got away."

"I never saw a fourth man, but it makes sense that they might have a driver."

"One of the robbers, the one that died, he has a younger brother with a record. We've brought him in for questioning and his apartment is being searched right now."

"Where does he say he was last night?"

"At home, with his girlfriend. She confirms it, but then, she's his girlfriend and six months pregnant. I'd think she'd say anything to keep him out of prison."

"What do you think; does he look good for it?"

"He looks like a scared kid to me. He's only twenty, got out of jail

a year ago and has been working a straight job ever since. He's an elevator repairman, same job his brother had before he started doing robberies."

"Elevator repairman to armed robber, that's some career change."

"Chalk it up to drugs. The kid says his brother got hooked on meth and screwed up so much at work that they fired him. After that, he turned to crime to support his habit."

"That's messed up, Deke, but let me know if you learn anything from the brother."

"I will, and oh yeah, there's a five-thousand-dollar reward being offered now. It seems one of the pieces of jewelry, a necklace, was worth big money. If we don't locate it all soon, these fellers are gonna walk out of here with smiles on their faces."

I hung up with Deke and finished having breakfast with Gary. When we were done eating, we were going to the mall. My old laptop had died and I was thinking about switching to a tablet. I'm not much of a shopper, but I love gadgets.

As he paid the check, Gary told me that he had to stop in at his office. He had left some papers behind that he needed to work on over the weekend. As we stood in the lobby of his office building, waiting to ride up, I had an epiphany. I suddenly realized where the robbers had stashed the loot.

~

DEKE, along with two police department tech guys, met us at the scene of the crime.

It was the first time that Deke and Gary had met, and Deke grilled Gary as if he were my father. After my daddy went missing years ago, Deke looked out for me, my mama, and my sister as if we were his own flesh and blood.

For his part, Gary took the interrogation well and apparently passed muster, because Deke gave him a friendly slap on the back when they finished talking.

Yellow tape still stretched across the ballroom's doorway, warning all not to enter. We had no intention of entering, what we wanted was in the hallway, or so I hoped.

Deke pointed to the bank of elevators and told the lab boys to have at it.

In less than five minutes, they had found not only the jewels and wallets, but also the two numbered T-shirts and the guns. The items had been hidden in a false control panel box on the roof of the car. All of it was atop the elevator car marked number three.

Deke turned and smiled at me.

“Your daddy would have been impressed, Blue, I know I am.”

“Thanks, but it only made sense once you told me about the dead man’s former profession. An elevator repairman would think of an elevator as an elevator car, and I remembered reading somewhere that they had brakes. So, it was worth a look.”

“The kid is off the hook as an accomplice and you’re five grand richer.”

I smiled as I reached over and took Gary’s hand.

“Now we can go shopping.”

When we left, we took the stairs.

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Part 5

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I WAS SEATED across from Ron Tenney, owner of the AAAAAAAAAA Bail Bonds Company.

Ron was in his fifties, had a full head of white hair, and a ready smile. The smile was quite a contrast to most people in this business. Dealing with criminals tended to make you sour on humanity and a frown often came easier than a grin.

Yet, Ron seemed to always be in a good mood. I suspected it was because of his wife, but having never met the woman, it was only a guess.

The AAAAAAAAAA Bail Bonds Company, or Ten A, as most people called it, was in a storefront on Lancaster Avenue in Fort Worth. The building was old when Ron was born and the office was crowded with filing cabinets and desks.

Ron handed me a flyer.

"That's Joe Harmody, a bank robber; he's worth four grand if you catch him."

The man in the photo was handsome and beefy looking. If I hadn't known he was a bank robber, I might have guessed pro wrestler instead.

"Any known associates?"

"He's a mystery, but a buddy at the county jail told me that a woman stopped in to see Harmody once. My buddy said that he's sure she was one of the waitresses at Bongo Bongo."

Bongo Bongo was a restaurant that served burgers, burgers brought to you by women in skimpy shorts and tops.

"Do you have a description of her?"

"Blonde, large breasts, and leggy, but the name on the visitors' log was Deanna Andrews."

I sat and stared at Harmody's photo. Four thousand was good money, but bank robbers tended to be violent when confronted.

Ron arched an eyebrow. "So, Blue baby, do you want it?"

I nodded.

"I'll give it a week. If Harmody doesn't make contact with this Deanna Andrews by then I'll assume he's left her behind."

"Sounds like a good plan, now, what's this I hear about you dating a defense lawyer?"

"His name is Gary Dent."

"Dent? As in *Goldman, Harper, Rogers & Dent*?"

"That's him."

"I met him once; he seemed like an okay guy."

"He is."

"Well good, but I hope it's not serious?"

"Why do you say that?"

"If you married a guy with his bucks you might quit, and you're my best bounty hunter."

I shook my head.

"Oh, we're a long way from marriage."

"Not if Dent is as clever as they say he is. A smart man would scoop you up quick."

I stood and waved Harmody's picture.

"Thanks for the compliment, but right now this is the only man I'm interested in being handcuffed to."

Ron laughed. "Good hunting, Blue, and hey, be careful."

~

FORTY MINUTES LATER, I parked my pickup truck in a back corner of Bongo Bongo's parking lot. The restaurant was in a shopping center and shared the lot with a supermarket, a sporting goods store, and an electronics repair shop.

I had binoculars hanging around my neck. Whenever someone that could be Harmody walked toward the bar, I checked them out.

I had been there for two hours when my phone rang. It was Ernesto Roberts; he was the man I'd been paid to guard a week earlier.

"Mr. Roberts, how can I help you?"

"Blue? Blue there's a man here trying to get into my house. I called the police but they haven't gotten here yet."

I started my engine as I answered him.

"Is your door locked?"

"Yes, but he's kicking at it. I think he'll soon kick it open."

I was only a few minutes from Ernesto's house. I floored it as I got on the highway.

"What's the man look like?" I asked.

"He's Hispanic and very muscular. Oh God, I can see a gap in the door now."

"Stop looking at the door and run. Go out a window if you have to, but get away from him and get to a neighbor's house."

"But my nearest neighbor is a half mile away."

I could hear a banging noise in the background that was accompanied by the sound of wood splintering.

“Run!” I shouted into the phone, even as I neared the exit on the highway.

When I arrived at Ernesto’s, the front door was wide open. As I walked inside with my gun drawn, I heard the screaming. When I got to the rear of the house, I could see Ernesto running away from a man. The back of his large property was fenced in. Once Ernesto reached the fence, he fell against it and cowered.

I ran outside and headed straight for them. I didn’t need to be stealthy, Ernesto’s blubbering and begging covered the sounds of my approach.

However, Ernesto spotted me first, and the look of relief on his face made his pursuer aware that they were no longer alone. The man turned and raised his gun at me, but an instant later, he dropped his weapon to his side and smiled, as I did the same.

“Hey, Chica, what are you doing here?”

“I was going to ask you the same thing, Ramón.”

“Hold on a second,” Ramón said, then, he turned and knocked Ernesto senseless with one punch. Afterward, he threw him over his left shoulder and started walking back toward the house.

“Follow me, Blue, you and I have some catching up to do, eh?”

I shook my head, let out a sigh, and followed Ramón into the house.

~

WHEN WE WENT BACK INSIDE, Ramón laid Ernesto on the sofa, then walked over to the door. Ramón closed it as best as he was able, considering that the wooden frame was splintered. When he was done, he turned and grinned at me.

“It’s good to see you, but we don’t have much time. There’s a man coming here to kill our friend on the couch there.”

“He thought you were here to kill him.”

Ramón looked offended. “I’m not a killer. I find people, same as you. I was asked to find this man and—”

A motorcycle sped into the driveway. When its engine died, in the background, very faintly, I could hear an approaching siren.

Movement caught my eye and I saw Ernesto sit up on the sofa with a dazed look on his face.

The man outside got off the bike. He was dressed in black leather and wore a mirrored helmet. He took a gun out from behind his back and ran toward the door.

Ramón stood to the left of the entrance and I took the right side. The man hit the door hard, expecting it to be locked.

When the door flew open without any resistance, he tumbled into

the foyer, lost his footing and slid across the hard wood flooring in the living room. He didn't come to rest until he was five feet from the sofa, where Ernesto, now fully awake, let out a shriek of fright.

Ramón got to the intruder first and wrest the gun from his hand, a second later, and I yanked the helmet from his head to reveal a young face with a mop of blond hair.

Ramón stared down at the man and pointed his gun at his face.

"Don't move, Chico, don't even blink."

The once faint sirens now came screaming into the circular driveway, and within seconds, the sound of the police car's doors opening reached us.

I pointed at Ramón while talking to Ernesto.

"This man is your friend." I then pointed at the man on the floor. "That man is not your friend, understand?"

Ernesto nodded his head wildly.

"Yes, yes, thank you, Blue, thank you for saving me."

Ramón placed a heavy boot on the back of the motorcyclist's neck and stuck the guns in his belt as I placed my gun behind my back. We had just enough time to put our hands in the air, before two cops entered with their weapons drawn and ready.

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IT TOOK over five hours and eight different cops to straighten things out, but when the dust settled, Ramón and I were free and the motorcyclist was in custody. It turned out that he was hired by the fiancé of Ernesto's niece.

The fiancé learned that Ernesto had named his niece in his will and that Ernesto had also been in a land dispute with a reputed mobster.

His plan was to kill Ernesto and frame the mobster. When the wedding took place next month, he'd be sitting pretty. However, Chaney, the mobster, learned of the hit and hired Ramón to babysit Ernesto until he could have the hit cancelled.

Needless to say, the wedding was called off.

~

RAMÓN and I were sitting in Bongo Bongo. We were both eating one of their famed Bongo burgers. The interior of the place was brightly lit and there were TV's everywhere with sporting events playing on them.

And while the shorts and tops of the waitresses were revealing, they weren't as skimpy as I'd imagined they would be.

Ramón watched as a particularly well-endowed waitress walked by, then he smiled at me.

"I'm surprised you picked this place to grab a bite, but I have no complaints."

"I'm working. There's a bail skip who might show here. I figured why not kill two birds with one stone."

"How is my little Amy?"

"She's good; Becca says she still talks about you."

"Tell Amy I said hi when you see her."

"Actually, Becca's been bugging me to bring you to dinner one night; she and her husband Richie want to thank you personally for saving Amy."

Ramón blanched.

"What?" I asked.

"I'm not used to normal people wanting to spend time with me, that's all."

“What do you mean normal? You’re not normal?”

“Both my parents died when I was still a boy and after that I was a gangbanger. I broke free from that life and have been on my own ever since.”

“Don’t you have any other family?”

“Yeah, I have some blood relatives, but we never talk.”

“What about friends?”

He shook his head.

“I consider myself your friend,” I said.

“Thank you, Chica, Blue; that means a lot to me.”

“So, when can I tell Becca to expect you?”

“Never. Whenever I get around normal people it makes me nervous. I can’t imagine working nine to five and then coming home to the same woman night after night, and the kids, all that responsibility, it isn’t natural.”

“I think you’re an adrenaline junkie, but I warn you, I promised Becca that I’d bring you by some day and I never break a promise.”

He grinned. “This one might be your first.”

“So how long have you worked for Chaney?”

“I don’t. I’m freelance. If you want somebody found; I’ll find them. The bodyguard bit today was a one-time thing. So, who’s this guy you’re looking for?”

I told Ramón about Joe Harmody and his connection to Bongo Bongo.

“Four grand? That’s good money, but if he’s smart, he won’t come back here.”

“Yeah, I know, but I—”

“Gotta check it out,” Ramón finished.

I laughed. “That’s right.”

“You got a picture of this guy?”

I passed him a copy of the flyer with Harmody’s photo on it and he studied it.

“Bank robbers, short term thinkers every one of them. There was a guy in California years ago who robbed banks for twenty years and got away with over three million. When they finally caught him, he had less than a thousand dollars to his name.”

Our waitress came by and asked if we needed anything else. She had big blonde hair, obvious fake boobs and long, shapely legs. I told her that we were good and asked for the bill. Before she left the table, she sent Ramón a bright and lingering smile.

“It looks like our waitress likes you.”

“All women find me irresistible; in fact, it’s probably taking all of your self-control not to reach across the table and fondle me.”

“The thought has crossed my mind, but I’m seeing someone.”

"That guy Gary you told me about?"

"Yes."

"Good for him. Now tell me, which of these girls is Harmody's?"

The waitress walked back toward us with our bill in her hand and her eyes on Ramón.

"Here she comes now," I said.

~

AT CLOSING TIME, Ramón left the restaurant with our waitress, otherwise known as Deanna Andrews. He was going to try to get her to open up about Harmody. I appreciated the assistance but doubted that his only motive was to help me; after all, Deanna Andrews was a good-looking woman. I don't mind saying that I envied her. Ramón was a good-looking man.

I followed them to her apartment and searched the street for any sign of Harmody. There was none. It was quiet, after two a.m., and the street was deserted.

A light came on in a third-floor apartment and a second later, went off. I thought it odd, but harmless, that is, until I saw the two struggling figures bang against the window.

I jumped from my truck and raced up the stairs to the third floor. Just as I rounded the corner, a shot rang out, followed by a man yelling, "No!"

I tried the door and found that it was unlocked. As I eased it open, Ramón called my name.

"Blue?"

"It's me."

I found the light switch.

Joe Harmody was on his knees in the middle of the living room and crying in grief. Lying on the floor beside him was Deanna Andrews. There was a gunshot wound that entered just beneath her right eye. There was no need to try for a pulse, the brains and blood splattered about the room told me she was dead.

"What happened?"

Ramón looked a bit shaken, but his voice was strong and unwavering.

"When we entered, I hit the lights and she shut them off and kissed me. I heard a sound behind me and found Harmody coming at me. He had a gun in one hand and a blackjack in the other. I threw his partner, Deanna, at him, and reached for my gun. As I was taking it out, she grabbed my wrist and we struggled for a second before I could throw her off me. As I pushed her away, Harmody fired a shot at me and hit her instead. When he realized what he'd done, he

dropped the gun and rushed over to her."

A tentative knock came at the door. I opened it to find an elderly woman wearing a pink robe. In the hallway behind her were other people in their sleepwear.

"I heard a shot. Is Deanna all right?"

I sighed. "No ma'am, please call the police."

The old woman began to cry.

"I already called."

~

ALTHOUGH RAMÓN MIGHT BE IRRESISTIBLE, Deanna Andrews took him home that night because he was roughly Harmody's height and size. They had planned to lure someone to her apartment and murder them.

Afterward, they would place the corpse in Harmody's car and set the vehicle ablaze. It was to be an attempt to fake Harmody's death, and to then start a new life together.

Instead, Deanna was dead and Harmody was going to spend the rest of his life behind bars.

~

RAMÓN INSISTED on bringing wine because, as he put it, "That's what real people do, right?"

When Becca answered the door with Richie, Amy pushed her way out between them and jumped up into Ramón's arms.

"Ramón, I missed you," Amy said, then she gave him a big smooch on the lips.

Ramón smiled at me. "Maybe normal life isn't so bad after all."

Then, we entered the house and had dinner with our friends.

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Part 6

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I WAS IN EAST TEXAS, deep inside the Piney Woods.

The Piney Woods are fifty thousand square miles of forest that stretch across parts of four states. I was there looking for a bail skip named Tanner Harlow. Harlow was a doctor, forty-nine, long divorced and, judging by his picture, would appear to look younger than his age.

Dr. Harlow had embezzled over two million dollars from the medical facility he was employed at. He did so after learning that they planned to sever ties with him. That same night, he was arrested for driving while intoxicated.

He managed to bail himself out on the drunk driving charge just in time to be arrested for the embezzlement. Two days later, he skipped on an eighty-thousand-dollar bond and left Fort Worth.

After asking around, I discovered that Harlow was an avid hiker and often spent time in The Piney Woods while on vacation.

Seven hours of driving got me to the woods. After talking to dozens of people, I came across a man who knew Harlow slightly. He told me that he had spotted the doctor earlier that day, hiking along a trail that led into Louisiana.

That made sense; Harlow was from Louisiana and still had family there.

I contacted the local cops and let them know who I was and who I was after. I soon met with a Forest Ranger named Doug Selby. Selby greeted me with a smile and a tip of his cap, before asking me to hop into his yellow jeep.

Selby was about my age and wore a wedding band. He had a full head of reddish-blonde hair that seemed to go in all directions at once.

After we chatted up some people at a campsite, we learned that a man fitting Dr. Harlow's description had been seen hiking along a trail less than a mile from where we were.

Selby and I hopped back into the jeep and drove parallel to the trail for about five miles. Afterward, we parked the jeep amid a copse of trees. After I put my backpack on, we then walked northwest along the trail and hoped to run right into Harlow.

As we tramped along, Selby and I talked quietly.

"Is this guy supposed to be dangerous?" he asked.

“No, he’s a doctor, an obstetrician, but then, you never can tell.”

“I hear you, so how long have you been a bail enforcer?”

I opened my mouth to answer him when Tanner Harlow came walking out from behind a bush while zipping up his fly. I grabbed the cuffs off my belt and walked over to him.

“Dr. Tanner Harlow, you are under arrest for the crime of—”

And that’s when he turned and ran back into the woods.

Selby and I shared a look of frustration, then we went after him. Harlow was in good shape, but he was still twenty years older than either me or Selby. We ran him down within minutes and I cuffed his hands behind his back.

Thank God Selby was along. Harlow’s attempt at escape had taken us deep into the woods on a meandering route. I could only guess where we’d left the jeep. Without hesitation, Selby pointed north and began guiding us back to the trail.

While walking back, we heard a noise that sounded like someone digging. Selby motioned for me to stay put with Harlow, before he moved quietly toward the sound to take a look. A few seconds later, I heard him shouting.

“You! Drop that shovel and put your hands in the air. Now!”

The next thing I knew, several shots were fired from two different guns.

With my weapon in my hand, I ran toward the sound of the shots while dragging Harlow along by the belt. He tripped and fell on his face just as I spotted a strange man reloading his weapon.

The guy was six feet tall, with a thirty-something face and prematurely white hair. He stood over Selby, who was wounded and writhing in pain on the ground.

Twenty feet to the Selby’s left was the body of a naked girl, lying in the dirt. One look at her lineless, bloodless face and I knew two things. One: she was dead, and two: she had never made it beyond fourteen years of age.

I told the man to drop his weapon just as he finished loading. He raised his gun and I shot at him three times, but missed, due to the distance. The man turned and ran into the trees.

I rushed over to Selby and saw that he had been struck once in the abdomen, but that there was no exit wound. As Selby gritted his teeth against the pain, I grabbed the radio from his belt and reached the dispatcher at his headquarters.

It was only then that I realized I had little idea how to tell them where to find us. I’m no city slicker, but The Piney Woods were unfamiliar to me. That fact was the main reason Selby was along in the first place.

He must have realized this too, because he motioned for me to

place the radio near his mouth so that he could talk.

It took over a minute, but between moans and gasps of pain, Selby let his fellow Rangers know where we were, and that his attacker was extremely dangerous.

Harlow!

I had forgotten all about him. I turned my head and found that he was still lying where he fell, eyes wide and staring at the dead girl with a look of horror on his face.

I rushed over to him, helped him to stand, and took off the cuffs.

"Ranger Selby's been shot, help him."

"What?"

"You're a doctor, help him."

"I don't do gunshots; I deliver babies."

I shoved him toward Selby.

"Help him!"

A scream.

It was followed by two shots, then silence.

I picked Selby's gun up from the ground before taking my backpack off and tossing it to Harlow.

"I know it's not much, but there's a first-aid kit and bottled water in there. You do what you can to help him. When the other Rangers arrive, tell them that there may be more casualties west of here."

I was thirty feet away when Harlow called to me.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going after the killer."

I headed toward the place where the screams came from while praying that Dr. Harlow would help Selby and not run away again.

The woods were thick with fallen branches and I soon gave up any attempt at stealth. Every step cracked and crunched fallen twigs and leaves, and so I relied on my eyes to keep me safe.

If anything moved, I would be ready to kill it.

I found the source of the scream lying at the side of a trail with a gaping wound in the back of her head, beside her lay an older man with features much like her own. He had probably been her father. He'd been shot in the heart and must have died instantly.

As I moved past them, I noticed blood on the man's right fingertips, a closer look revealed what looked like flesh.

Good!

He had marked the son of a bitch even as he died. When I caught the monster, he wouldn't be able to deny the DNA evidence under the nails of his victim.

From my right and below, I heard someone traipsing through the woods, and I headed that way.

A few minutes later, I came upon a dirt road that was nearly

hidden by foliage, then I heard an engine start a hundred yards to my left.

I cursed. Of course, he had a car nearby. He couldn't very well have walked the dead girl in here on foot.

A moment later, I saw the car. It was a black BMW and it was picking up speed. I ran into the road and fired a shot into the air, before sighting in on the windshield.

The killer ducked down just as he floored the car. I leapt aside and waited. When he was even with me, I fired my gun's two remaining shots at the right front tire and watched as the car swerved toward the trees.

He hit a stand of saplings with a resounding *CLUNK!* that caused steam to rise from under the hood, but a moment later, he was out of the car and sprinting away.

He was fast, faster than me by far. As we reached a treeless field of weeds, he was nearly a city block ahead of me.

My gun was empty, but I still had Ranger Selby's *Colt Python*. I checked the cylinder, three bullets left.

I fell to one knee, arms extended, and sighted down the six-inch barrel.

My first shot missed, but the sound of it halted him and he stared back at me.

Big mistake.

I fired a second shot and watched him jerk his head back with a start. Then, he reached up to the right side of his head. Even from where I was, I could see the blood on his fingers.

He shouted a string of obscenities and began firing at me in a frenzy.

I hit the ground hard and, and as cliché as it sounds, I heard the bullets whiz above my head.

Click! Click! Click!

He was empty. I raised my head. We locked eyes for a moment before he dropped the now useless gun and ran away.

I followed, with one bullet and one thought, to stop this walking nightmare before he hurt anyone else.

The field ended at a small stream. As I reached it, I saw him on the opposite bank. I splashed my way across while keeping him in sight. When I was halfway to the other side my foot landed on something slimy and I went down on one knee. I felt an immediate jolt of pain as my right knee landed on a jagged rock and cut through my jeans. When I reached the shore, I was wet up to my waist and had a scraped, bloody knee, but the pain was fading and I was still able to run.

I looked around for my prey. Just when I thought that I had lost

him, I spotted a shock of white hair running away to my right. His hair was so white that it was brilliant and seemed to sparkle whenever the sun hit it.

I then followed him as best as I could. It was a losing proposition though, as he was just faster than I was, and soon I lost sight of him amidst the thickening trees.

I slowed, listening for footfalls, for movement, for anything.

When the silence broke, it was so loud and so close that I nearly leapt out of my skin.

"What the hell are you doin' there, son?"

The question came from an old man sitting up in a tree, in a deer blind. He was looking down at a tree ten feet in front of me. My white-haired quarry stepped out of his hiding place and threw something up at the old man.

I saw a glint of metal, a flash of blood, and then the old man tumbled twenty feet to the ground with a knife in his throat.

I fired my last remaining shot at White Hair as he reached down to pull the rifle off the dying old man.

White hair screamed in pain and left the rifle. I watched as he hobbled off into the woods and knew he'd been wounded. I ran to the old hunter to see if I could help, but he had already died from either the fall or the knife in his throat.

Four dead bodies and a seriously wounded Ranger in less than an hour, White Hair needed to be stopped, and he needed to be stopped now.

I relieved the dead hunter of his rifle and was happy to see that it had a scope. It was a Weatherby with a twenty-eight-inch barrel. My daddy had one just like it when I was growing up. I'd shot it enough to know how to use it.

I followed White Hair and was pleased to see an intermittent blood trail amongst the grass. Within a minute, I was in sight of him as we came upon a hill that sloped downward. The hill ended at what sounded like a road, as the sound of tires on pavement came and went sporadically.

My last bullet had slowed White Hair down, and as he reached the rim of the slope, I was less than a hundred feet behind him.

He went down the tall hill in an uncontrollable slide and hit bottom hard before tumbling out into the road. A green Mercedes braked with a long squeal and just avoided running him over. When it finally stopped, he was lying halfway beneath it.

The driver of the car, a well-dressed, middle-age woman with short red hair, exited the car. As I cried out to warn her, White Hair leapt up and punched her in the face.

The woman fell to the ground, unconscious, and White Hair ran

around to the driver's side door. He stared up at me then with a maniacal grin on his scratched and bloody face as he sent me an obscene gesture.

As he sat in the driver's seat, I dropped flat, rifle up, and sighted down at him.

Before I could take the shot, he floored the gas pedal and drove over the woman lying in the road. He deliberately aimed for her head, and he hit it.

I dropped the rifle in revulsion as I fought not to vomit at what the car had done to her.

Then, rage overcame repulsion and I grabbed the rifle again.

By the time I took the first shot, he was a quarter of a mile away, moving fast, and it was a downward angle.

I missed, not even close.

The second shot brought the sound of breaking glass to my ears, but the car stayed on the road and was approaching a curve.

Time was running out.

I had three cartridges left and I let all three fly.

My reward was the sight of a splattered, bloody window and the beautiful vision of the car swerving into a ditch and flipping over, end over end.

I then laid the rifle down on the grass and cried.

I was still lying there when I heard the police and ambulance arrive below, and a few moments later, a helicopter appeared overhead.

It landed in the field behind me and a State Trooper walked toward me, walking beside him was Dr. Tanner Harlow.

"Blue Steele?" the trooper said.

I nodded.

"I'm State Trooper, Sergeant John Wincomb. Ranger Selby is on his way to the hospital. He's going to make it, thanks to Dr. Harlow here."

I looked over at Harlow. "Thank you."

Harlow shrugged. "I was a doctor before I was a thief. I would never just run away and let a man die."

Wincomb pointed at the rifle slung over my shoulder.

"You got him with that?"

"Yes."

"That's some fine shooting."

"I want to go home," I said.

Wincomb nodded in understanding, and the three of us headed for the chopper.

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BLUE STEELE – BROKEN - Book 2 of the Blue Steele Series

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LANDSVILLE GUN CLUB, LANDSVILLE TEXAS, AUGUST 1998

THE ANNUAL BOYS SHOOTING COMPETITION was always a hotly contested match between skilled competitors. This year's event drew a record crowd, because for the first time, girls could enter the contest.

The competition was open to children, ages twelve to sixteen. It was then divided into classes of shooters based upon age. The winner of each age class would compete in a final contest to determine who would win the three-foot high, silver competition trophy.

Of the seven girls that had entered, only one remained, fourteen-year-old Blue Steele. Her father, a Texas Ranger by the same name, looked on with pride as his daughter competed for the trophy in the final round. Blue's mother was home with Blue's sister, Jenny, who had come down with chickenpox.

Young Blue's opponent was a sixteen-year-old boy named Chet Tucker, and Chet was also the previous year's winner. The two of them were tied, with only one event left, the 300-yard target shoot.

Burt Tucker, Chet's father, and a fellow Texas Ranger, leaned over and spoke to Blue Steele.

"Little Blue can sure shoot. I think my Chet may have met his match."

Blue Steele smiled. He was a tall and muscular man with a square jaw and piercing eyes.

"That girl worked night and day to get that good, but she's got nothing on your Chet. Your son is a hell of a shot."

Burt took a swig from a flask.

"One thing's for sure; one of our kids is going to win that trophy."

"Yeah, but hey, stop taking sips from that flask, will you, Burt? You do have to drive home, you know?"

"Shit, don't worry about me; I can handle my liquor."

Chet Tucker was up first, and the contest was winner take all.

The tall boy squared his shoulders, brought the rifle up, and took careful aim.

KAPOW!

After checking with the binoculars, the official called the result.

"Miss!"

“Shit,” Burt said, and then he spat in the grass.

“What’s he shootin’, Burt?”

“Remington .260’s, why?”

“Blue’s shootin’ .223’s.”

“Hell, what’s that, like 55 grain?”

“Yeah, nice and light to cover the distance.”

“She still has to hit what she’s shootin’ at.”

“You’re right there.”

Little Blue took position and aimed her rifle, then she gazed back at her father. Blue sent his daughter a smile and a nod, and the fourteen-year-old prepared to shoot.

KAPOW!

Once more, the official raised his binoculars. If Blue failed to hit the target, then the competition would continue, however, the competition was over.

“Bulls eye!”

Blue screamed for joy and ran to her daddy, who gathered her up in his arms.

“You done good, girl.”

“Thanks, Daddy.”

Blue set his daughter down. He then spotted a group of the other competitors’ fathers pointing at them and laughing.

Blue called out the man who pointed. The man was six-foot-six and muscular, but he had a beer gut growing.

“You got something to say, Johnson?”

“No, little Blue won fair and square, but my boy was a little distracted, if you know what I mean.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Hell, Blue, the girl’s beginning to blossom. I think our boys spent more time looking at her ass than the targets.”

“She’s fourteen, you pig!”

Johnson’s eyes roamed over the young girl.

“She’s gonna be tasty in a few years, yeah boy.”

Blue started toward the man but was held back by Burt Tucker.

“No Blue, that lard ass ain’t worth it.”

Blue seethed for a moment more, but then relaxed.

“You’re right.”

“Of course, I’m right,” Burt said, then he smiled at Blue. “How about you and your daddy meet me and Chet at the ice cream parlor? I think someone has something to celebrate, and it’s my treat.”

Blue grinned. “Thanks, Mr. Tucker.”

“Sure thing, we’ll see you two there.”

~

AS HE WAS DRIVING to the ice cream parlor, Blue looked over and saw his daughter wiping away tears. He pulled his truck onto the shoulder of the highway and asked her what was wrong.

"Nothing."

"You wouldn't be crying if it was nothing, now would you?"

"No, sir."

"Then tell me what's wrong."

"They didn't want me there."

"Who?"

"Those men, some of the boys, they said that girls shouldn't be allowed to enter the contest."

"Did they say why?"

She shrugged. "They said girls can't shoot."

"Well then, what's that you're holdin' there? It looks like a trophy to me."

Blue lowered her eyes.

"They still didn't want me there."

"Look at me, young lady."

Blue's head shot up and she stared at her father. She knew what that tone of voice meant. It meant that he was mad.

"Who are you?"

"Daddy?"

"I said, who are you? Are you my daughter?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, my daughter can go wherever she wants and do whatever she sets her mind to, isn't that right?"

"Yes, sir."

"What's your name?"

"Blue Steele."

"Say what?"

"I'm Blue Steele."

"But isn't Blue a boy's name?"

"Not anymore."

"Where'd you get that trophy, girl?"

"I won it."

"Get out of here."

"It's true."

"You must have worked hard to get that good."

"I did. I practiced twice a day for like forever."

"Are you saying that you earned it?"

"I did."

"That's right, you earned it, baby. Don't you let anyone in this world pigeonhole you or limit you. Those men and those boys back there don't know what I know."

“What’s that, Daddy?”

“That girl or not, you’re as tough as they come, and you don’t know how to quit.”

Blue grinned. “People say I’m just like my daddy.”

“Do they now?”

“Yes sir.”

“And what did you say your name was again?”

She sat up straight.

“I’m Blue Steele and I can be and do whatever I set my mind to.”

“And that trophy proves it.”

They pulled back onto the road and Blue rested her head against her father’s shoulder.

“I love you, Daddy.”

“I love you too, baby.”

As Blue began to describe her final shot, her father moaned in sorrow at what he saw up ahead.

“Oh no, Burt’s done crashed his truck.”

Burt Tucker’s silver Chevy pickup was smashed against a tree with a crushed right front.

As Blue parked his own truck, the man who had been driving behind him rolled down his window and spoke to him.

“Oh, that looks bad, you stay with the driver and I’ll go call an ambulance.”

“Good, but hurry.”

The man took off to make the call and Blue got out of the truck.

“Grab that first-aid kit from under the seat,” Blue told his daughter, as he rushed toward the scene.

Blue grabbed the kit, but when she reached the truck, her father held her back.

“They’re both beyond anything that kit can help, honey. Burt has a chance, maybe, but… poor Chet is dead.”

Blue began to cry, and her father placed an arm around her shoulders.

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FIFTEEN YEARS LATER

WHILE I normally prefer to work alone, I do sometimes work in a group. That was the case as I and seven other bounty hunters were out tracking down bail jumpers.

The oldest of our group was a man named Burt Tucker. Burt had been a friend of my daddy's and was an ex-Texas Ranger.

I had known Burt since I was a little girl, and so I knew the story behind his dismissal from the Rangers. The short story is that Burt is an alcoholic, while the long story involves the death of his only child, Chet, in a one-car accident that was caused by drunkenness.

There were eight of us working together and we were three girls and five boys. At fifty-eight, Burt was the oldest. The youngest was a cute blonde named Susan, but everyone just called her Blondie. Blondie was only twenty-one and a brand-new rookie.

From the moment we met, Blondie attached herself to me.

It seemed that she had heard about some of my more interesting captures and wanted to learn about how I worked. I told her that the best quality you could have in this business was determination, to never quit until you made the capture.

We were traveling in a caravan of four vehicles. I had my truck and Blondie rode along in the passenger seat.

"Hey, Blue?"

"Yeah?"

"What are those two metal rings down there on the floor for?"

"Handcuffs, if I think a capture might be trouble I handcuff them to the rings. They're embedded into the floor."

"Have you ever captured anyone really dangerous?"

"A few, one was a serial killer who had murdered seventeen women in Arkansas. I found that out later. At the time, he was only wanted for non-payment of child support. I didn't like the way he looked at me. I didn't like it one bit, so I handcuffed him to those rings. It was only when I brought him back that I learned about the murders."

"It's a good thing you were careful."

"I follow my gut as much as I can; it's rarely been wrong."

“And what’s your gut say about me?”

“You’re riding along with me, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, and thanks, a couple of those guys, Randy and George, they look at me like they want to devour me.”

I laughed. “They did the same to me when I first started, but after I got a few captures under my belt, they stopped thinking of me as just a woman. They’re harmless, just horny.”

“Today’s been so exciting, how many did we capture so far, five?”

“Six, but that was early, when you can get them at home. This one we’re tracking now, Luther Knox, he knows that we’re out here looking for him. He’s also worth ten grand.”

“Why so much?”

“He’s committed several violent assaults, mostly on women. They never should have let him out.”

“So where are we heading now?”

“To the old refinery out on Interstate 30, George got a tip from a snitch that Knox is camping out there.”

“That old refinery is huge.”

“Yeah, but there’s eight of us, we’ll split up into four groups of two and cover more ground, faster.”

“Can I team up with you?”

I looked over at Blondie while wondering how long she would last in this business. It takes a certain amount of inner toughness, along with a streak of independence to be a good bounty hunter. So far, Blondie seemed content to just be my sidekick. But then, I thought of my own early days and how I had clung to the woman who trained me. Maybe I was being too harsh.

“Of course, you can team up with me, who else would I pick?”

Blondie smiled. “Thanks, I really want to learn from you.”

“You’ll do fine,” I said.

~

BLONDIE WAS RIGHT about the refinery, it was huge.

There were about forty round blue tanks that stood three stories high and were anywhere from fifty to a hundred-and-fifty feet across. Each tank had a metal staircase on its side, and every roof had to be checked.

Large feeder pipes crisscrossed the massive space, some as wide as two feet. The entire complex had a ghost town feel to it. I noticed that Blondie looked uneasy.

“This place must be spooky at night,” she said, while getting out of the truck.

I didn’t want to say it, but I agreed. All the time we were walking

about, searching for Luther Knox, we kept hearing these little sounds and pings, as if someone or something was living inside the tanks. Each time we checked an area, we found nothing. It was probably just rats, or some other critter, but at night, in the darkness, hearing those sounds would creep me out good.

Before we entered the grounds, we'd met up with the rest of our crew by the fence. The gate was padlocked, but there was a hole on the fence's south side that trespassers, such as ourselves, used to sneak in. I had just squeezed through the hole with Blondie, when I heard Burt Tucker let out a moan.

Burt had a bad knee from the accident he'd been in years ago. Trying to slip through the gate was aggravating his injury. I walked back and helped him through.

"Thanks Blue, this knee of mine is a devil sometimes and I ain't getting any younger."

"It was a tight fit, but tell me, how are you now?"

"I'm good. I can walk and I can shoot; f Knox shows up, I'll nab him. I faced much tougher men in the old days."

"I know you did; I used to listen to you and Daddy talk."

"He'd be proud of you. I hope you know that."

"I like to think so, Burt, now I'll see you later, Blondie and I are going to check out the north end."

"Be careful, Blue."

"I will, and you be careful too."

We had been searching for over an hour when I heard shouts coming from the western side of the complex. Blondie and I raced over and saw George lying on the ground. He was bleeding from a cut on his scalp, while Randy was tussling with Luther Knox, who had a knife in his hand.

I rushed over to them. When I was a few feet away, I went into a slide, as if I were trying to steal second base. I swept Knox's feet right out from under him and he fell on top of me while dropping the knife.

Randy was then able to take out his gun and he aimed it at Knox's face.

"Get off her, scumbag!"

I rolled out of the way and came up with my cuffs in my hands.

With Knox taken care of, I turned to see about George and found Blondie checking the seriousness of George's wound. She then helped him to his feet.

"How are you doing, George?" I asked.

"I'll have a knot on my head, but I think I'll be all right."

"It looks like it needs a stitch or two," Blondie said.

"George, why don't you and Randy take Knox back to your truck while Blondie and I round up the others."

George nodded. “All right, and that was a nice takedown, Blue.”

“Thanks, George.”

George looked over at Blondie.

“Little lady, thanks for helping me.”

“You’re welcome, but get that checked out.”

Just then, Knox opened his mouth.

“Hey! You, the blonde, I got something you can check out.”

Randy punched Knox in the gut.

“That’s my partner you’re speaking to, show some respect.”

That quieted Knox down, and Randy and George walked him back toward our vehicles.

Blondie was smiling. “Randy said I was his partner and George thanked me. You were right, they’re not bad guys.”

“I told you. They just had to get used to you, but now, that doesn’t mean that they won’t still hit on you from time to time.”

“I can handle them.”

“Good, now let’s go find the others.”

~

BUT WE COULDN’T fiND the others, and they weren’t answering our shouts either. When I tried my phone, the signal kept dropping out, most likely due to the tanks. I began to fear that Knox had somehow overcome them before Randy and George came upon him. I was just about to send Blondie back to get Randy to help us search when Brenda came around one of the large tanks.

“Brenda, is everything okay?”

She looked startled to see us.

“Uh, yeah, yeah everything’s good, but we haven’t seen Knox.”

“George and Randy caught him, but Knox injured George. He needs a couple of stitches on his scalp.”

“You got Knox? Great.”

“So where are the others?”

“Oh, they’re around, they’re back there in that old truck hanger.”

Blondie headed for the hanger. “I’ll go get them.”

“No!” Brenda said, and it was so loud and sudden that Blondie and I both jumped.

Blondie smiled. “It’s no problem, Brenda, I can go get them.”

Brenda shouted at the top of her lungs.

“Burt, Joe, Marcus! Come on out!”

I heard Marcus shout back at her.

“What’s wrong?”

“Blue and Blondie are here, George and Randy caught Knox.”

The three men came out one by one and I noticed that they were

all dirty. Joe and Marcus were younger than Burt was, and both were married. Joe Ryan had recently wed his second wife, and Marcus Webb had twin daughters.

"What were you guys doing?" I asked them. "It looks like you were crawling around inside the tanks."

Burt laughed. "We might as well have been, we heard noises coming from one of the tool sheds, then, when we shined a light in, something moved, we thought it was Knox, but it turned out to be a rat the size of a dog."

Blondie made a face. "Really?"

"Yeah, so we got out of there, but I guess we got a little dirty."

All three of them were filthy. I wondered how they could get so grubby by just walking into an old shed, but in the end, I didn't think much of it.

"Well, let's get out of here, huh?"

"Who are we going after next?" Blondie asked.

I shook my head.

"I think we should call it a day. George is hurt and by the time we drive back and hand over Knox, it'll be getting late."

"Blue's right," Burt said. "And when you add in Knox's capture we'll each get about four grand, now that's a good day."

Brenda smiled. "A damn good day."

~

BLONDIE and I had drinks to celebrate her first day on the job. Afterward, I went home to shower and change. I also had to pack a bag. My boyfriend, Gary, was flying us out to his ranch in Bandera.

This would be my third trip out there and I couldn't wait. I loved horses, but I rarely got to be around them. It was why I worked so much and why I tracked down the dangerous, high bounty bail skips. The more money I made and the quicker I made it, the sooner I would be able to buy my own ranch.

The phone rang as I was doing a last-minute check of the apartment. I'm a bit obsessive about checking to make certain that I didn't leave anything on that shouldn't be on when I leave the house, particularly when I'm going away on a long trip. After checking to see if I turned off the coffee pot, I grabbed the phone. It was my best friend, Becca.

"Hi Blue."

"Hey honey, what's up?"

"I just wanted to catch you before you left for Gary's ranch, and remind you to take pictures this time."

"I remembered. I even packed away my video camera."

“Great, so, you and Gary are still going strong, hmm?”

“Yes, and I know that tone, what’s on your mind?”

“I like Gary, don’t get me wrong, but Bandera is a long way from Fort Worth.”

“Yes, it is, but so what?”

“Blue, you two have been together for nearly a year now. You get along well with his brother and sister and you’ve always wanted a ranch.”

“What are you getting at?”

“Marriage, Blue, the man’s not stupid. He’s bound to ask you to marry him soon, then I’m afraid you’ll move out to that ranch and I’ll never see you again.”

“Becca, Gary and I are a long way from marriage, plus, I think his first wife made him a little wary of it. Gary and I love each other and we’re both happy with things the way they are. I don’t think that’s going to change anytime soon, okay?”

“I sound like I’m your mama, don’t I?”

“Yes, but you’ve been acting that way since we were toddlers, so I’m used to it.”

“Have a good time at the ranch, but be sure to come back.”

“Yes, Mother, now, how are Richie and the kids?”

“We’re all good, oh, and I meant to ask you, have you seen Ramón lately? Amy asks about him all the time.”

“No. Actually, I haven’t seen him in a while.”

“Too bad, we all had fun the time you guys visited.”

“I’ll give him a call soon and tell him to give Amy a ring.”

“I also thought that you two made a cute pair when you were here.”

“Ramón and me? We’re just friends, you know that.”

“Does Ramón know that?”

“What do you mean?”

“He looked at you often when you weren’t looking his way. I think he likes you.”

“He’s never said anything.”

“Probably because you’re with Gary, but if you were free, I think it would be a different story.”

“I think you’re imagining things, because you’re afraid that Gary will take me off to Bandera.”

“I like Gary, but I’d hate having you so far away.”

“Don’t worry, Gary and I both like things the way they are.”

“Good, then go have a great time, and tell Gary I said hi.”

“Right, love you.”

“Love you too, bye.”

I hung up the phone and thought about what Becca had said. Was

Gary considering asking me to marry him? Would I marry him? I shook the thought from my mind and headed for the door… but not before I checked the stove one last time.

~

GARY flEW us to the cattle ranch in his airplane, a Cessna.

He only owned a third of the ranch, as his older brother and younger sister owned the rest.

Gary's older brother was named David. David was five years older than Gary, who was forty-one, while Grace, Gary's sister was thirty-eight. Gary and David looked a lot alike. Both had clefts in their chins, and thick, dark wavy hair, but while Gary was lean, David had a belly. David blamed the gut on his love of gourmet food and wine.

He indulged his tastes in food by also being a great cook. On both prior occasions, I'd spent at the ranch, I'd gained three pounds. That was despite being in a saddle and hiking for a good deal of the time.

I had stayed at Gary's apartment the night before because we wanted to fly out early the next day, which we did. By noon, we were landing at the airstrip on the Triple Q Ranch.

~

IT WAS the day before we were going back to Fort Worth and Gary and I were out riding. I was on a chestnut mare named Angel; she was my horse whenever I was at the ranch. After we'd been riding for about an hour, Gary suggested that we stop and relax by an old tree.

It was a beautiful day and we were in a lovely pasture. I felt more relaxed than I had in some time. We lay beneath the tree and I rested my head in Gary's lap, as I stared up at the cloudless sky through the branches.

"Do you ever think about marriage, Blue?"

So much for feeling relaxed.

"I…yes, sometimes… why?"

"Well, I know that most women consider it, and we have been together now for nearly a year."

I sat up. "Are you trying to tell me something, or maybe ask me something?"

Gary shook his head.

"No, oh no, I'm not about to propose marriage, no, it's just that it's been on my mind lately… my ex, she's back in Fort Worth."

"You've spoken to her?"

"We had drinks together."

"Oh really?" I said, and then I stood up. "When was this?"

"A few days ago, and don't look at me like that. Nothing happened."

"Did you call her, or did she call you?"

"Neither, I ran into her after work while I was having a beer, and we began talking."

"What's her name? You've never said."

"Her name is Janelle?"

"And her last name?"

He sighed. "She still goes by Dent, Janelle Dent."

"She kept your last name, why? You didn't have children together, or did you?"

"No, you know I don't have any children."

"She kept your name and you were married for less than a year? What's her maiden name, is it odd?"

"Her maiden name was Jamison."

"Jamison is not an odd name, and yet she kept yours, why is that?"

"I don't know."

"What did you talk about?"

"Old times, college days, you know."

I stared at him, and suddenly, something became so clear.

"She wants you back."

"That's crazy, until the other day I hadn't seen Janelle in years."

"It might be crazy, but it's true, she wants you back and she'll make sure to run into you again, count on it."

"That wouldn't prove anything."

"Why not?"

"She just rented an apartment in my building."

~

NEEDLESS TO SAY, the rest of the day wasn't as pleasant as the first part had been, and it only got worse.

While watching TV after dinner I saw on the news that an acquaintance of mine had been murdered. He was shot to death in his car as he returned home.

His name was Frank Quatro, a bail enforcement agent who worked out of Dallas. I hadn't seen Frank in nearly two years, but I liked the guy. Learning of his death made me sad.

We left the ranch the next morning. After going home and unpacking, I stopped by the office, the AAAAAAAAAA Bail Bonds Company. I spoke with my boss, Ron Tenney, who greeted me with his usual sunny grin. Ron wasn't actually my boss, as I was self-employed, but I worked for him almost exclusively for years. He had given me my break when I'd entered the business, and so I felt like he

was my boss.

"Blue baby, how was your trip?"

"Relaxing, how have things been around here?"

"The usual, busy, hey, did you hear about Ken Simon?"

"Ken, no, what about him?"

"Oh, Blue honey, I'm sorry, but he's dead. Someone shot him in his car last night."

"No, Ron, you're mistaken. It was Frank Quatro who was killed. I saw it on the news yesterday."

"I heard about Quatro, but Ken was shot too."

"Ken is dead?"

"Yeah, ah shit, I'd forgotten that you two dated at one time."

"It's all right, we weren't very close. We just went out to dinner and a movie once. Damn, he was a really nice guy, who the hell would kill him, or Frank?"

"The cops were in here asking questions. They wanted to know if anybody here was threatened lately. I told them that we get cursed at and menaced all the time, same as they do. Not many people are pleased with us when we're taking them back to jail."

"Did they ask about Frank or Ken?"

"No, but you know it's connected. It seems like someone is settling scores with bounty hunters, so keep those big green eyes of yours wide open, just in case, you hear?"

"I hear, and don't worry, the two murders must have been just a coincidence."

"I don't like coincidences, especially when they're planned."

"I'm going to give Diego Ramirez a call."

"The homicide cop, why?"

"I don't like coincidences either."

~

I HAD KNOWN Diego since we were kids; we'd grown up together in Landsville and he and my sister dated in high school. I met him for lunch and we caught up. Then, I asked him about the two murders.

"I didn't catch that case, Blue. Rossetti and Burns did; I'm working a double murder on that armored car robbery, along with the FBI."

"Right, that happened just before my trip to the ranch. The robbers killed the crew of the armored car, right?"

"That's it, but I'll ask Rossetti what he has on those killings. I don't like the fact that they're both bounty hunters."

I thanked Diego. Afterward, I went home and spent the rest of the day paying bills and cleaning my truck.

After a good night's sleep, I got up early the next morning and

went to Trinity Park. I was meeting Becca for a run.

We ran well, and far, we had both been lazy the week before and felt like making ourselves pay for it. After an eight-mile run, we went to the coffee shop.

I saw it the moment I walked in the door. The story was on the front page of the newspaper and being talked about on the television in the corner of the coffee shop.

Joe Ryan, one of the seven bounty hunters that I had gone out with to track down Knox, had been murdered, shot to death while he was out walking his dog.

Three bounty hunters in as many days and it was no coincidence. Bullets recovered from the first two killings matched, and someone was now taking credit.

A newspaper reporter received a letter from the killer naming his next victim, Joe Ryan. The letter had been mailed the day before and delivered right about the time that Joe had been out walking his dog.

There was a serial killer stalking victims in my city, and there was a chance that my name was on his list.

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“NO!”

“But why not? It makes perfect sense. Why risk yourself?”

“Because I would be running, hiding, and I don’t run or hide from danger, I face it; it’s part of my job.”

Gary sighed at me in exasperation.

“I’m supposed to be the macho one, remember?”

I sighed right back at him. We were having lunch together at a Chinese restaurant near his office. He was trying to talk me into staying at his ranch until the serial killer was caught. There had been a fourth murder yesterday, a bounty hunter from El Paso.

“I’m not going to hide at your ranch. I’m going to keep living my life and if this bastard comes after me I’ll handle it.”

“Why? Why not just play it safe for once and stay away until the cops track this whack job down?”

“That could take weeks, months, or might never happen.”

He reached over and took my hand.

“I worry about you, more than I normally do. It would kill me if anything happened to you. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

We kissed, and as we were kissing, someone cleared their throat behind us.

Our lips parted, and I found a blonde staring at us. She was short, maybe five-two, and I doubt she carried a hundred pounds, but the pounds she did own were all in very strategic places. As I looked around, I saw that most of the men in the room were staring at her.

Her blouse was baby blue and matched her shoes perfectly, along with her eyes. Her white silk skirt rode high enough to show off her shapely legs. I knew who she was without even asking. I could read the look on Gary’s face.

“Janelle, what are you doing here?”

“Hello to you too, Gary, and this must be the girlfriend.”

I tried to be gracious.

“Hello Janelle, my name is Blue.”

“Blue? I once had a dog named Blue, she was a mangy little thing.”

Bitch!

“Janelle, you didn’t answer my question. What are you doing

here?"

"It's a restaurant, Gary; I stopped in to get take-out."

"But you always hated Chinese food."

Janelle placed a hand on his cheek.

"I've changed my mind about a few things lately."

Gary stood. "Well… enjoy your food. Blue and I were just leaving."

"All right, but I'll see you at home."

"What?"

"The apartment house, Gary; it's my home too, remember?"

"Right, let's go, Blue."

Once we were in the car, I asked Gary a question.

"When things ended between you two, was it your idea, or hers?"

"What does it matter? It was a long time ago."

"So, it was her idea. Was she cheating on you?"

"I thought so at the time, although I never caught her."

"She wants you back, Gary."

"Even if that were true, I—no. I see what you're doing. You're trying to avoid what we were talking about, about you going to the ranch."

"I won't run away and hide on the off chance that I'm a target. I won't."

"But why not? Can't you see that it's the only sane choice? Why are you always so ready to risk your life?"

"I'm not risking it, I'm living it, and I'm living it my way. My answer is no."

Gary banged a fist on the dashboard.

"You're a damned stubborn woman!"

I leaned over until my lips were an inch away from his.

"I'm also free this afternoon. Can you think of anything we could do to fill the time?"

He still looked upset with me, but twenty minutes later, we were in his apartment.

~

I TEAMED up with Blondie again the next day.

She was on the trail of a non-violent child predator who liked to take naked pictures of young boys. The bounty was only for five-hundred dollars, but it was a good way for her to get her first solo takedown. I was strictly along for the ride, but I would be offering a critique. It was Blondie's idea, she asked me to do it as a favor and I couldn't say no, especially when there was a crazy out there killing bounty hunters.

The man she was hunting was known to frequent public pools

where children swam. His name was Collins.

She found Collins at the YMCA. They offered swim classes after school and Blondie made him as he was hanging outside the building. Collins was most likely looking for an opportunity to sneak in.

"That's him! Blue look, that's him."

I checked the photograph again and saw that she was right. She had found him. She was halfway home.

"Good job, now go arrest him."

Blondie's enthusiasm died. "Couldn't I just call the police?"

"You could, and I'd recommend it if you're not comfortable confronting him. But all we know about him says that he's non-violent, and sooner or later, you'll have to capture one yourself."

"You're right, let's go."

"No, he's all yours, and I know you can do it."

She still hesitated.

"Do you have a set of handcuffs?" I asked.

"Yes."

I smiled. "Then you're all set."

"Right… wish me luck."

"Good luck."

Blondie got out of the car. It was her car and I was in the passenger seat, as I truly wanted to be along for the ride as just an observer. She needed to make a capture on her own.

The bail skip watched her as she approached but didn't seem concerned. One good thing about being a woman in this business, it makes it easier to sneak up on your targets. He probably thought that Blondie was a college kid.

She walked right up to the man, stated who she was, and then asked him who he was. He admitted to his identity and she told him that she was placing him under arrest. When she brought the handcuffs out, he ran.

She had left the keys in the car. I scooted over into the driver's seat and took off after them. The guy was fast, but he had no stamina, after two blocks he was done. Blondie caught up to him as he leaned against a building, trying to catch his breath.

I pulled up alongside the curb and called out the window.

"Great job, Blondie."

She was grinning like it was Christmas morning.

"Don't forget to check him for weapons," I said.

She gave him a quick pat-down, then placed him in the back seat. I moved over into the passenger seat and off we went.

"I got him!"

"You sure did."

After she handed him over to the cops, we went back to the

AAAAAAAAAA Bail Bonds Company. I spoke with Ron Tenney in his office, while Blondie filled out her paperwork.

"The kid did good, Blue, and thanks for taking her under your wing."

"No problem, I like Blondie, and she's eager to learn."

"I gave her a chance because of her dad, but it looks like I made the right move."

"Who's her father?"

"Oh, she's Matt Holden's kid, Matt was before your time. He was a great bounty hunter, but he was a mean cuss too. I actually banned him from working here, but he's dead now, been dead for years."

"Why did you ban him?"

"For one thing, he brought back a female skip on his own. The woman was a looker and she claimed that Matt raped her. There were ultimately no charges, because she later dropped it, but you know my rules. If any of my guys arrest a woman, they call for female back-up. How many times have you ridden along as an escort?"

"Dozens, and it's a good rule; it protects us and the skips."

"That's right, plus, it's an easy ten percent for you when you ride along."

"So, Blondie is a second-generation bounty hunter?"

"You know; I think Matt's father was also a bounty hunter in his day. That makes her third-generation."

I smiled. "Well then, the kid's a natural."

~

I TOOK Blondie out to dinner to celebrate.

She was so excited. I wanted her to keep her momentum going and so I asked her to team up with me.

"Who's the skip?"

"An arsonist, when we catch him we'll make three grand each."

"Is he dangerous?"

"He can be, he assaulted one of his cellmates in lockup but wasn't charged."

"Do you have any leads?"

"Yeah, an ex-wife who remarried and moved to Denton. I was planning on going out there early to talk to her, but then I learned that she's away and won't be back in the state until Sunday night. We'll wait and go see her first thing Monday morning."

"Thanks, Blue, I know you don't need me along to catch this guy, and I appreciate the offer. I still have a lot to learn."

"You'll get there, and Ron told me about your daddy, it sounds like bounty hunting is in your blood."

Blondie stared at me in silence for a moment, as the smile left her face.

"I don't like to talk about my father, okay?"

"Sure, Blondie, and hey, how about dessert?"

~

AFTER DINNER, Blondie and I made plans to meet early Monday morning at the office, and then I went home. My apartment has a parking lot behind the building. I drove to the back, at the last parking place, then quickly got out of the truck.

Someone had been following me. I had seen the same green pickup truck ever since I drove away from the restaurant; it had followed me home. I wondered if it was the serial killer. He hadn't struck in two days, but I and every other bounty hunter were on edge. I was paying extra attention these days to my surroundings, it was how I spotted the truck.

As I was walking toward the door, the pickup came into the driveway fast. The driver's side window was down, and I saw a gun barrel sticking out.

As I raised my weapon, I saw another truck whip in behind the first one, it was big and black and that was all I could register about it before I locked my gaze back on the first truck. I filed the second truck away and took aim at truck number one. We fired an instant apart and both of our shots missed. My round did activate his airbag; he lost control of the truck and ran head-on into a tree near the back fence.

When I looked for the other truck, I saw that it had U-turned and was heading out of the parking lot.

I ran to the first truck, ripped open the door, and saw a familiar face. It was a man named Reich. He was a Neo-Nazi. I had captured a friend of his just a short time ago. Reich had tried to stop me and got shot for his trouble. He was still wearing a knee brace for the injury. I wasn't the one who shot him, though, that pleasure went to a friend of mine named White, who was along for the ride.

"Why were you trying to kill me, Reich?"

"I ain't saying shit. All I want is a lawyer."

I secured Reich, then called the cops. When they showed, Diego was with them.

"Blue, are you all right? I was with the uniforms when they got the call."

"I'm good, Diego. Reich there tried to hinder an arrest a short time ago and got that messed up knee for his trouble. Tonight, he was looking for revenge."

"Maybe, or maybe you just caught the serial killer."

"Reich?"

"I don't know, the serial killer is using a 9.mm and he had one on him, but we'll interview him and see what ballistics has to say. In the meantime, stay aware."

"When you talk to him, ask him about a partner. There was a second truck here, but it might have been nothing, they bugged out as soon as they saw what happened."

"All right, and again, you're sure you're okay?"

"I'm good, and thanks for checking up on me."

"Hell, Blue, you're like my little sister. You know I'll always look out for you, now take care."

"You too, Diego."

~

THE NEXT DAY WAS A SATURDAY. After sleeping late, I went down to the station to see if anything new had developed concerning Reich. It had, the ballistics had come back, and his gun wasn't a match for the serial killer's.

Reich also said that he didn't know anything about another truck. It was beginning to look as if his attack on me was just one of opportunity. The cops believed that he had spotted me at the restaurant and decided to get some payback for the knee. Bad move, he was now facing some serious prison time.

I met Gary for lunch, and afterward, we were going to a movie.

"Janelle stopped by my apartment last night."

"And?"

"And nothing, she just wanted to know when the garbage days were. I told her, she thanked me, and then left."

"Oh please, she just wanted to see you. She was probably hoping that you'd invite her inside. What was she wearing?"

"What?"

"I said what was she wearing?"

He shrugged. "A nightgown, but she had a robe over it."

"A nightgown, she just happened to be wearing a nightgown?"

"Well, it was late."

"Gary, I know you're not dumb; you must see what she's doing."

"I do, and don't worry. She and I are over. It's why I told you about it, so you would see that I'm not trying to hide anything from you."

"I like that, keep me informed. If she tries something like that again, I think I'll set her straight."

"Speaking of not hiding anything, when were you going to tell me that someone tried to kill you last night?"

“I wasn’t keeping it a secret, exactly, but I knew how it would upset you, and so… I wasn’t going to say anything.”

“I went to see a client at the jail this morning and heard about it that way. I should have heard about it from you. Blue, honey, please find something else to do. Bounty hunting is too dangerous.”

“It’s what I like to do, Gary, and I’m good at it. I can also take care of myself, so can we please drop the subject?”

“For now, but I’m not through. Someday I’ll get you to see the light.”

We went to the movies, but I couldn’t enjoy the film. If I wasn’t thinking about how much Gary hated my job, then I was thinking of Janelle. Why now? Why chase Gary again after so many years? And Gary had to be flattered by the attention, but was he tempted? He said no, but the woman was good looking, I’ll give her that. Also, he wasn’t the one who ended the relationship, and second chances can be tempting.

I finally managed to put Janelle out of my mind and spent the rest of the night having a good time with Gary.

In the morning, I was getting dressed to go jogging with Becca when the story came on the news. Marcus Webb was dead, the victim of a hit and run. That made him the second person to die that had been with me at the refinery.

I don’t always carry a weapon while I’m jogging, but usually just keep it in the truck. I grabbed my ankle holster, stuffed my gun inside and strapped it on. If the killer came, I would be ready.

As I was walking past the window, I spotted it. It was the second pickup from the other night. The black one, it was back.

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I LEFT my apartment building by a rear exit, then slipped down the alley on the left side of the building. I could see the truck well now, but not the driver, because the windows were tinted.

The truck was a Chevy Silverado with a crew cab. I looked for a rear license plate and found none, then I held my gun at my side and walked toward the truck.

I was spotted when I was twenty feet away, and the truck sped off and was gone.

I thought about giving chase, but by the time I got back to my own truck, he would be long gone.

When I returned upstairs, I called Diego to see if it had been the serial killer who killed Marcus Webb.

"No, Blue, it seems to be just a tragic hit and run. The reporter who's been getting the notes from the serial killer didn't receive one this time, also it was a car that killed Webb, not a gun."

"It's still tragic. Marcus was a friend; he also left behind a wife and two little girls."

"I know, but listen, about that serial killer, we now know that the notes were written by a woman. Handwriting analysis says it's most likely a young female."

"A woman, hmm, there aren't too many female serial killers, are there?"

"Their numbers have been growing, but just keep it in mind."

"I will, and take care."

~

"WHY ARE you wearing your gun? Are you nervous about that serial killer?" Becca said.

"The truth, yes, and so I'm taking an extra precaution."

"Good, you know I worry about you."

"I do know that, and I appreciate it."

We were back in the coffee shop after a hard run. We didn't run far, only four miles, but neither one of us had felt like doing it at all and that always makes for a crappy run. It also didn't help that the humidity was going crazy. We were both drenched in sweat and

smelly, but we had coffee and cinnamon raisin bagels, so we were happy.

"Has Gary's ex tried anything else?"

"No, at least nothing he's told me about."

"If she moved back here just to see him again, well, she must be pretty serious."

I said nothing, and Becca took my hand.

"Hey, are you worried?"

I nodded. I hadn't admitted it to myself until right then, but yeah, I was worried. Gary was a good guy, but anyone could be weak when consistently tempted.

"If Gary is ever foolish enough to cheat on you, well then, good riddance."

"That's easy to say, but I really love him, Becca."

"I know honey, but don't worry; Gary seems like he's got a good head on his shoulders, as my mama says."

I smiled. "Yes he does, and you're right, I shouldn't worry. Now, why don't we get a cheesecake to go?"

I spent the rest of the day at Becca's. We were so close that her kids were basically my nieces and nephews, and I always had fun hanging out with them.

~

THE NEXT MORNING, I showed up at the office ten minutes early and found that Blondie had still beaten me there. She was eager to go. That was good, that enthusiasm might carry her through the day. I didn't want to dampen her spirits, but this arsonist we were hunting might prove to be an elusive target.

The man had no close family, no wife, and no children. He had been making his living selling at online auction sites the last few years, and so he didn't even have co-workers that might offer a lead.

However, he did have an ex-wife, and the divorce had been bitter. I was going to talk to her in the hope that she might be able to tell me where he would run to. I knew he was originally from Upstate New York, but if he ran there, the chase was over. He was only worth six grand and traveling to New York would eat up a chunk of that.

I needed to find him, and find him fast, before he left the state.

We arrived in Denton early, a little too early to go calling on someone you wanted help from, and so I suggested that we stop at a diner and eat.

"I heard about what happened to Marcus, Blue. Have they caught the driver of the hit and run car yet?"

"No, not yet."

“I thought it was the serial killer, but they’re saying that there was no note.”

“You picked some time to become a bounty hunter. I hope you’re watching your back these days.”

“Are you kidding? I’m like paranoid. I check over my shoulder all the time now.”

I looked at her and smiled. I had recently turned twenty-nine, not exactly granny material, but at twenty-one, Blondie seemed so much younger than me, and she was so cute that I knew she must get hit on constantly.

“So, Blondie, what’s your boyfriend like?”

“I don’t have a boyfriend.”

“Really?”

“Yes really, but I do have my eye on someone.”

“Well, that’s good, it sucks to be alone.”

“Your boyfriend’s name is Gary, right?”

“Yes.”

“Is it serious?”

“Yes, but now his ex looks like she wants him back, so I’ll be setting her straight soon.”

“She’s trying to break you two up?”

“I think so, but I trust him, and like I said, I’ll be setting her straight.”

“Straight?”

“Yes.”

“Funny word, isn’t it?”

I stared at her for a moment, not getting her meaning, but then the waitress dropped the check off and I forgot all about it.

~

THE NAME of the arsonist’s ex-wife was Teresa Breton.

I had fed her address into my GPS before we left, and after we ate at the diner we drove to her house. I smelled the smoke before I saw the flames.

Teresa Breton’s house was on fire.

It was the third house on the left of a wide street and standing across from it and watching the flames was the arsonist, her ex-husband, Rob Kiley. Kiley was looking at the flames the way most men looked at Blondie. His attraction to fire was somehow sexual. His interest in the flames was so total that he never saw me until I hollered at him to get on the ground.

Kiley took his gaze away from the fire and stared at my gun.

“What the hell, lady?”

I tossed Blondie my handcuffs.

"Cuff him."

Once she had his wrists bound behind his back, I headed toward the house. Someone inside was screaming and it sounded like a child.

"If he moves, shoot him. And call the fire department!"

"Be careful, Blue!"

The fire had been set on the side of the house, where the garbage cans were kept. I was able to climb onto the porch, but when I tried the front door, it was locked. I was just about to blast the lock apart when the door opened and a woman with a baby in her arms came running out. Meanwhile, I could still hear someone screaming for help inside.

The woman looked at me with relief. She was the one we'd come to talk to, Teresa Breton.

"Oh, thank God, here, please take care of my baby; I have to go back for my step-kids."

She thrust the baby in my arms and rushed back inside. I felt a hand on my shoulder and turned around to see Blondie.

"Give me the baby," she said.

I looked past her and didn't see Kiley.

"Where's Kiley?"

"I used my cuffs and secured his wrists to the rings in your truck. He's not going anywhere, and the fire department is coming."

"Good girl," I said, as I handed her the baby, who was crying. He had begun wailing the moment his mother let him go.

I ran into the house to find Teresa Breton and the kids. It was like running inside an oven. I immediately felt my breathing get ragged, while trying to see anything above waist level was useless because of the smoke.

I found them. They were on the stairs and they were all in distress. Along with Teresa Breton were two children, a girl of five and a boy of seven. I took the girl from Teresa's arms, gripped the little boy's hand, then yelled for her to stay low and follow me.

We made it outside, after what seemed like forever, and all four of us collapsed on the grass. By now, half the neighborhood had been awakened, and people crowded around us.

Blondie came over and helped me up.

"Oh Blue, you scared the crap out of me. I was just about to run in there to find you."

I took the baby from her. "I'm okay, I just need some fresh air."

There was a murmur through the crowd, then discernible voices.

"Hey, I don't think she's breathing."

"Oh my God, somebody help her."

They were talking about Teresa Breton.

I rushed back to her, but Blondie got there first and began performing CPR. As the first fire engine pulled up at the curb, Teresa began breathing again, thanks to Blondie.

A cheer rose from the crowd and Blondie was declared a hero.

~

AND THAT WAS JUST the beginning of what turned out to be a long day.

The Denton Police Department wanted Rob Kiley for starting the fire at his ex-wife's house, while Fort Worth was livid that he wasn't being returned to their custody. While all of this jurisdictional squabbling was going on, Blondie and I were kept waiting.

Peace was finally established and, in the end, Kiley was driven back to Fort Worth by their head arson investigator, with the promise that he would be returned to face more charges in Denton.

Then, once we were through with the cops and Kiley, we went to the hospital to check on Teresa and the kids.

~

"I CAN'T THANK you two enough. Not only did you save me and my children, but you made sure my crazy ex will be locked up again. If you ever need anything, just ask."

Teresa's new husband was there, and he also thanked us.

As we drove back to Fort Worth in the dark, Blondie yawned.

"I'm so tired. I think it's all the emotion. It drains you."

"Yeah, it does, but it feels good to know that you really helped someone, hmm?"

"It sure does."

As we kept talking, Blondie told me that she lived just south of Dallas.

"If you don't want to make the drive tonight, you can stay at my place."

"Really?"

"Sure, it's been a long day and you look beat. I live near the office; we'll stop so you can get your car and then you can follow me home."

"I'd like that, Blue, thanks."

~

I LOANED her one of my nightgowns and set a blanket and pillow on the sofa.

When I told her goodnight, she looked at me as if something were on her mind.

"Is everything all right?"

She nodded. "Yes, yes, goodnight."

"Goodnight."

After spending half an hour shampooing to get the odor of smoke out of my hair, I finally climbed into bed. I think it took only seconds until I was asleep, but I awoke a short time later as I felt someone moving beside me.

I sat up, turned on the light, and found Blondie lying beside me. She was naked.

"Oh, hi, um, what are you doing?"

"I like you, Blue. I like you a lot and I want to be with you, no strings."

I didn't know what to say, so I said the first thing that came into my mind.

"I um like you too?"

She rose on her knees, embraced me, then kissed me on the mouth. I tried to be gentle, but I had to use a bit of strength to push her off.

"Whoa Blondie, whoa! I like you, I really do, but I'm straight and even if I went both ways, I don't cheat, and you know that I'm with Gary."

She stroked my face.

"But I care about you; won't you give me a chance?"

"I'm sorry, honey, and I care about you too, but this, us in bed, it's just not me."

She looked like she wanted to cry, but before it could happen she jumped out of bed.

"I'm going home."

The room was dark, but not completely absent of light thanks to the street lamps outside. As Blondie walked away, I could see faded scars across her back and buttocks. I was so startled by the sight that I said nothing as she left the room, but then I called to her.

"Blondie! Susan! Hey, you don't have to leave. You're tired and it's late, stay here."

No answer, and so I grabbed my robe and followed her into the living room, where she was getting dressed.

"You don't have to leave. This was no big deal. We just had a misunderstanding."

She turned around and screamed at me.

"I'm going! And don't worry about me, I'll get home just fine, and I don't need your help anymore."

She opened the door to leave, but then stood there.

"Blue."

"Yes?"

"Please don't tell anybody about this. I couldn't stand it if I knew you were laughing about me behind my back."

"Oh honey, I would never do that, now come on back in. You're too tired to be driving."

No answer, then she left and shut the door behind her.

For some reason I felt bad, but what else could I have done?

I went back to bed, but just laid there for a while before finally falling asleep and having bad dreams.

The next morning, as I was having coffee, I received a call.

It was Brenda Downing; she was another of the bounty hunters that had been with Blondie and me that day at the old refinery.

"Blue, please tell me that you've seen Burt Tucker?"

"No, Brenda, but why, is something wrong?"

"It sure is, we were supposed to meet this morning to talk, but he never showed, and now I can't find him anywhere."

"I don't know what to tell you, but I haven't heard from him. I'll call around and see if I can find him, if I do, I'll have him call you."

"Okay Blue, and thanks."

When I hung up with Brenda, I called Burt's cell, but there was no answer, then, I tried his landline and just heard the answering machine. Afterward, I called my boss, Ron Tenney. He was in his office.

"Hey Ron, have you heard from Burt Tucker?"

"Oh Blue, honey, I got bad news."

"About Burt?" I said, and immediately my mind conjured up an image of a drunken Burt crashing his truck into a bridge abutment, even though I was sure he hadn't had a drink since his son died.

"Blue, Burt's gone missing, but it's worse than that."

"What do you mean?"

"That reporter that keeps getting the letters from the wacko, he got another one this morning. It had Burt's name on it."

"Oh God."

"Yeah Blue, and listen, honey, stop on in. The cops want to speak to everyone."

"I'll be right in," I said, and hung up.

As I put down the phone, I began to cry, even as a red-hot anger began burning. Someone was murdering my friends, hunting them down one by one. If I ever got the chance, I'd kill them.

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WHEN I ARRIVED at the office, I was met by Ron, who looked as upset as I felt.

He and Burt were about the same age and I knew that they sometimes played golf together. It's one thing to have a business associate go missing and another when it's your friend.

I spoke to both of the detectives on the case but was unable to think of anything that might help them. I also felt as if they were eyeing me suspiciously, now that they were sure that the killer was a woman, but they were courteous all the same.

Amidst the furor over Burt's disappearance, work still had to go on. I left there that morning with a bail skip to search for.

It looked like an easy one. A man named Karl Cutler had been committing insurance fraud by buying cars for cash and chopping them up for parts in his body shop. Meanwhile, the owners claimed that they were stolen.

Cutler was thirty-three, married, with two young kids, and came from a big family. He had never been in trouble with the law before and at one time had been an auxiliary policeman. He must have seen how much time he was facing, panicked, and talked the wife into fleeing. Bad move. Now he was only in deeper trouble.

This one would have been perfect for Blondie. Cutler would likely not be violent and should be easy to find. When I'd seen Blondie that morning, I asked if she wanted to work together in finding Cutler.

She'd whispered, "No," as she sent me a look that was equal parts anger and embarrassment, and then she walked away.

I felt bad for her. I know it's not fun to be rejected, for whatever the reason.

~

KARL CUTLER HAD LIVED in a three-bedroom ranch home in Mansfield.

I parked my truck on the street that ran behind it, then walked through backyards like I belonged in them, to make my way to his backdoor. When I reached it, I found that it was locked.

I could have broken the lock and gone in, but experience has

taught me that nearly every home of any size has at least one unlocked door or window. Cutler's turned out to be the bathroom window, which was positioned near the end of the backyard deck. The window was narrow, but I made it through and landed on a blue & white tile floor.

The house was quiet, and hot, apparently, they remembered to turn off the central air before they left for their lives as fugitives.

I found what I was looking for in the bottom drawer of a filing cabinet, their telephone bills, and phone bills had calling records. It wasn't the current bill, but it told me who they called most frequently. It seemed to be Cutler's brother, Brian Cutler. On the wall of the living room was a picture, an enlarged photo, and it was hanging in a prominent place.

It showed Cutler and family with a man who looked very much like him, and they were standing in front of a lake house. I took the photo down off the wall, flipped it over, and read the inscription.

With Brian at his cabin, Cabana Lake, July 2011

It looked like I was going to the mountains.

~

ONCE I WAS in the area, it took me an hour to locate the right cabin. I was dressed in a pair of denim shorts with a flannel shirt and hiking boots. I also carried a backpack. I wanted to blend in as just another hiker passing by.

I wished that Blondie had come with me. For one thing, the area was beautiful and the hike up the hill to the cabin was enjoyable. A second reason was that I would be dealing with a family.

If I tried to slap cuffs on Cutler while I was alone, I would likely also have to deal with the wife. After nabbing him, I still had to walk him back down the hill. A helping hand would have been appreciated.

As I walked toward the cabin, I saw no one, but then I heard a TV playing inside. When I peeked through a window, I saw the Cutlers' two children, a boy and girl, watching a cartoon movie, but then I heard the adults.

Karl Cutler and his wife Carrie were out in the cabin's yard, and they were not happy. Cutler and his wife were holding each other and crying. In between the tears, I heard him begging for forgiveness, forgiveness for the mess that he had made of their lives.

I felt like the worst type of peeping Tom, but I couldn't seem to help myself. Their angst was so compelling that I felt mesmerized by it.

"I've ruined your life. For a little easy money, I ruined your life."

"No! I love you, Karl. Yes, you've made mistakes, but our lives

aren't ruined. We still have each other; we'll always have each other."

"We can run, change our names, but that's no way to live, no way to raise kids."

"If they catch you, how much time will you get?"

"I don't know, years, maybe even more than a decade."

"But it's your first offense; they have to take that into consideration."

"I ran, Carrie, and because I ran, things will be worse. Someone is probably looking for me right now, and when they find me and drag me back it'll make things worse."

I stepped into view.

"Hello, Mr. Cutler, my name is Blue Steele. I'm a bail enforcement agent and I've come to take you back."

For a second, I thought that he would run, but then a look of complete hopelessness came over him. Cutler hung his head, released his wife, and plopped down into a lawn chair.

"Please don't cuff me in front of my kids. I'll go along with you, I promise, just please don't cuff me, please?"

I walked over to them and Carrie Cutler looked at me as if I were a lit stick of dynamite. There was a pitcher of lemonade on the table and I helped myself to a glass. After I slaked my thirst, I sat down in one of the Adirondack chairs.

"Mrs. Cutler, please sit, we all need to talk."

~

"THAT WOULD REALLY WORK?"

"It's your best bet." I said. "You'll still do time, but by turning yourself in and cooperating, they'll be more lenient with you than they otherwise would have been."

Cutler looked at his wife. "I think it's my best option, and it's past time that I do the right thing."

His wife nodded her agreement, then stared at me.

"Why are you helping us? He's worth money to you, isn't he?"

I shrugged. "I'm not sure why I'm helping. Maybe it's because the last man I chased down was in the process of trying to burn his ex-wife and three children to death when I came across him. I took money for bringing him in and it doesn't feel right to do the same with a man like your husband, not back to back. A week from now, I might have just cuffed him and dragged him away, but not today, not when I can still smell the smoke from that fire."

Carrie Cutler reached over and patted my hand.

"You're a good woman, honey, thank you."

"You're welcome," I said, as I stood up. Then, I gave Cutler one last

piece of advice. “The sooner you come in the better it will be for you.”

He looked thoughtful as he stared at his wife.

“I can’t leave you here without a car and I don’t want the kids anywhere near the police station.”

“So, what do you want to do?” she asked.

Cutler looked back at me.

“Miss Blue, if I could, I’d like to ride back with you?”

I nodded, said, “Sure,” and thought to myself that it was the first time a skip asked my permission to come with me.

I looked away as Cutler and his wife kissed and said their goodbyes. When he walked over to me, I pointed at the cabin.

“I’ll wait while you tell the children goodbye.”

Cutler shook his head.

“I couldn’t bear it. I’d cry in front of them, let’s just go please.”

We made the walk to my truck in silence, and minutes after reaching it, we were on the highway and headed back to Fort Worth.

“Do you have someone in your life, Miss Blue?”

“Yes.”

“Ma’am, if he’s half as good as my wife, well then, you’re the luckiest woman in the world.”

I said nothing back, but a moment later, I wiped away a tear. It was the mountain air; it’ll do that to you.

~

AFTER DROPPING Karl Cutler off in front of the police station, I stopped by Gary’s office and found Janelle leaving the building. She gave me a smug look but said nothing.

“Why are you here?”

She stared me up and down.

“Excuse me?”

“I asked you why you were here. Were you here to see Gary?”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but yes, I was.”

“Why?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“Gary *is* my business. He’s my boyfriend and I don’t appreciate you hanging around him, and just so you know, if I ever caught you two together, it’s you I would take it out on.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“Take it any way you want; I’ve said my piece.”

I walked away from her then, and she said nothing else.

When I got to the office, I found Gary out by the receptionist’s desk.

He smiled, kissed me, and we walked toward his office.

“This is a nice surprise.”

“I had one myself on the way into the building.”

“Janelle, yes, she just dropped in to say hi, or so she said.”

“You’re not buying it either?”

“Of course not, and I told her so.”

“What did she say to that?”

“She smiled and told me that I knew where to find her, if I ever just wanted to borrow the ear of an old friend.”

“The ear? I bet that’s not the only body part she wants to loan you?”

Gary laughed. “I stopped thinking of her body parts a long time ago, ears and otherwise.”

“I can’t say the same.”

“You can’t?”

“No, I’d like to kick her ass.”

He kissed me again.

“Jealousy becomes you.”

“My place tonight?”

“I’ll bring wine.”

“It’s a deal.”

~

AFTER A LOVELY EVENING, it was back to work.

As I walked into the office, I saw Blondie. I was glad; I really wanted things to be good between us again. George and Randy were there too, and I waved hello to them.

“Any word on Burt, guys?”

“No, and the police were here again. They asked Brenda to come to the station to talk,” Randy said.

“Brenda? I wonder why? Maybe it’s because she and Burt worked cases together.”

I walked over and took a close look at George.

“That cut is healing well, but next time, duck.”

“You could kiss it and make it feel better.”

I smacked him lightly on the side of the head.

“In your dreams.”

We all laughed, and I went over to talk to Blondie.

“Hey Blondie, how are you doing?”

“I’m fine, Blue, just fine,” she said, but didn’t look me in the eye.

“How about we meet for coffee later?”

“I don’t think so, Blue. I think I’ll be busy.”

“Are you mad at me, kiddo?”

She looked me in the eye then, and I saw both pain and anger.

"I'm not mad at you, but there's just no point in us being friends."

I leaned closer, so my voice wouldn't carry.

"There's no point in us being *more* than friends, but that doesn't mean I don't like you, and you can come to me anytime for help."

"I don't need your help and I know that you don't really want to be around me, so stop acting so nice."

She grabbed up her paperwork and left the office in a huff. Randy saw her leaving and shook his head.

"That girl is moving too fast?"

"What do you mean?" I said.

"She's got paper on a skip wanted for aggravated assault. The dude is six-foot-five and two-eighty. The cops also suspect him of killing a stripper, but they can't prove it."

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah, George and I tried to talk her out of it, but she said that she could handle it."

I found a copy of the paperwork on Blondie's skip and Randy wasn't exaggerating. The man's name was Virgil Boggs and he was bad news. I had no idea what Blondie was thinking, but I thought that maybe she was trying to prove something, just who she was trying to prove it to, I didn't know.

I copied Boggs' info, his known hangouts, associates, that sort of thing, and went off to track down Blondie, while she tracked down Boggs.

~

I FOUND her car in the parking lot of a strip club. It was one of Boggs' hangouts. Blondie wasn't in the car and I wondered if she went inside to search for Boggs. With her looks, she'd have no problem getting work in the club as a server or a bartender. Such positions were always all female in these clubs and had a high turnover rate.

For a moment, I wondered if she was thinking of working as a dancer. It would be a desperate move, but if Boggs showed up, she'd be sure to see him.

After a few minutes went by and I still hadn't seen her, I was thinking about going inside to look for her. That's when I saw something twinkle in the trees at the rear of the club. I grabbed my binoculars and took a closer look.

It was Blondie. She was hiding in the trees at the back of the club and using a camera with a telephoto lens to keep an eye on the rear entrance. The twinkle I saw came from light reflecting off a silver bracelet with charms that she always wore on her wrist. She must have felt certain that if Boggs showed up, he would enter by the rear.

He was said to be close friends with the club's owner and the office entrance was in the back.

For her sake, I hoped that Boggs was a thousand miles away. She was too inexperienced to go after a man like that, and to do so in a place where he had friends was just foolish.

The lot encircled the club. From where Blondie was positioned, I realized that she could see the front entrance as well. Her camera could zoom in on the drivers when they entered the property and take their pictures. She didn't seem to know that I was there. That told me that she had just gotten into position. I hoped no one had spotted her, but that bracelet twinkled constantly in the sunlight.

I was just lowering my binoculars when I spotted it. It was the black Chevy Silverado again. It was parked out on the narrow access road that led to the strip club's parking lot. I started my engine. I was preparing to ride over and confront the driver, when I saw three men headed for the trees where Blondie was hiding. She must have been spotted.

I turned off the engine, hopped out of the cab and ran toward them with my gun at my side. As I got closer, I saw that one of the men was carrying a modified break-action shotgun, a Mossberg. He had the twin barrels sawed down to nubs. If he fired that at Blondie, he'd be sure to kill her.

I heard an engine start out on the road. It was the black pickup. Not good, that meant that I was seconds away from being caught in the middle.

The man standing to the left of the man with the shotgun fired a pistol toward Blondie's last position. I heard her scream. Whether it was from pain or fright I didn't know, but I had to distract them before they killed her.

There was a green dumpster near the fence. I ran for it just as I let loose a shout.

"Over here!"

I slipped behind the dumpster just as the pistol fired and a bullet *BINGED!* off the metal as it ricocheted. It was followed by the *BAROOM!* of a shotgun blast, as metal pellets bombarded the other side of the dumpster.

I dropped to my stomach. The dumpster rode atop metal castors and sat four inches off the ground. From that angle, I could only see them to just below their knees, but I remembered that the man with the shotgun was wearing khakis, and so it was his legs that I aimed for.

BAM! BAM! BAM!

I fired the shots and heard an agonized scream that told me at least one of the shots hit its target. I turned my head and saw that the black

pickup was entering the lot. That was followed by the club's front doors opening, and two more men came out with guns. If the driver of the pickup didn't get me, then, those two surely would.

The two new men began firing at me as more bullets hit the other side of the dumpster.

C'mon, Blondie, give me a little help.

Just as I had that thought, the two men firing at me from the front of the club went down. A barrage of bullets stitched across their torsos, and I knew that they were dead before they fell. The shots had not come from Blondie; they came from the black pickup.

Whoever was inside that truck had just saved my life, so I turned my attention on the two men closing in on the dumpster.

I fired more shots between the metal wheels and heard a cry of pain, as one of my shots blew apart a foot, then I rolled three times to my right, clear of the dumpster, and shot the last man in the chest.

"Blondie!" No answer. *Shit!* I wanted so badly to check on her, but first I had to know who was in the pickup. I crept toward the tinted side window, which was in a down position, and with my gun loose, but ready, I peeked inside.

"I should have known."

"Hey Chica, what's happening?"

The driver of the black pickup was Ramón.

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As Ramón stepped out of the truck, the curious patrons and a couple of the strip club's dancers began venturing out the front door.

"Call 9-1-1," I shouted to one girl, who was all but naked. She nodded her head and ran back inside. There were three dead and two wounded. I said a prayer that they be the only casualties.

"Blondie!"

"Blue? Blue is that you?"

She sounded like a scared child.

"It's me honey, come on out, it's safe."

She stepped out from among the trees like a frightened deer, then, she spotted me and ran over and hugged me.

"Oh God, that was so scary. When I saw the man with the shotgun I thought I was dead, and then I dropped my gun and couldn't find it."

"Blondie, are you all right? Were you hit?"

"No, but that was a close call. You saved me, Blue, you saved my life."

She raised her head and kissed me lightly on the lips. Ramón raise an eyebrow as he watched us.

"Blondie, this is Ramón; he saved both of us."

She eased away from me, looked over at Ramón, and smiled.

"Are you a bounty hunter, too?"

Ramón laughed. "Not quite, by the way, the wounded man over there, the one who was firing the handgun, that's Virgil Boggs, I think he's wanted, and so was the dude with the shotgun, Michael Conte."

"Blonde was tracking Boggs, but I don't know Conte, what is he wanted for?"

"He was accused of gun trafficking, but he skipped bail, that was weeks ago, and it happened in Oklahoma."

My eyes widened. "This place must be a fugitive magnet."

"It is, Chica; rumor is that the owner can get you a fake DL that looks like the real thing."

"What's a DL?" Blondie said.

"A driver's license," I said.

The ambulance came first, followed by the cops. I knew that the rest of the day was shot. Three dead bodies can cause a load of paperwork and eat up a lot of time.

~

RAMÓN WAS RIGHT about Conte being wanted, and also about the bar being a marketplace for phony ID's. When the whole mess was finally sorted through, Blondie was awarded the bounty on Boggs. It was a good one, eight grand.

Afterward, we stood in the police parking lot, while talking.

Blondie shook her head vigorously.

"I can't take the money; it really should go to you two. If you and Ramón hadn't shown up I never would have seen a penny of it. I'd probably be dead."

I thought for a moment, then came up with a solution.

"If it's all right with Ramón, I'd like to donate the money to that fund that Ron started for the murdered bounty hunters. I'm sure their families could use it."

Blondie smiled, and I was happy to see it. I really did like the girl a lot and wanted to remain friends.

"That's a great idea, Blue. Ramón, are you okay with that?"

"Whatever Blue wants to do is fine by me, and that serial killer is the reason I was here at all. I was keeping an eye out for Blue."

I stared at him. "Is that why you were following me around, you were worried?"

"Of course, I watch out for my friends, well, make that friend; you're pretty much the only one I have here."

I placed a hand on his arm.

"I'm going to walk Blondie to her car; I'll be right back, and we'll talk."

"Sounds good."

Blondie's car was four spaces away. As she started the engine, I leaned in and talked to her.

"Are we friends again, or are you still pissed at me?"

"I'm sorry about that, all of it. I never should have pressured you and I know you don't feel that way about me."

"No, but I still like you, don't forget that. Unlike Ramón, I can't have enough friends."

"Thank you again, Blue, and goodnight."

I watched her drive away. When I turned around, Ramón was right there.

He smiled. "Hungry?"

"I'm starved."

~

"LET ME GET THIS STRAIGHT, you were following me because you

were worried that I might become the serial killer's next victim?"

"I was looking out for you," Ramón said.

"You don't think I can take care of myself?"

"You take care of yourself better than anyone I've ever known. I was just hanging around to lend a hand, like today."

"I appreciate it, of course, hell Ramón, you saved my life, but I do wonder about your motives."

"My motives?"

I cocked my head. "Do you have a thing for me?"

"Have you looked in a mirror lately, Chica?"

"I'm not talking about physical attraction; I'm talking about something deeper."

He shrugged. "I care about you, sue me."

I ran a hand through my hair. First Blondie, and now Ramón. Who knew I was so irresistible? Although, I had to admit, Ramón was much more my type. He was muscular, handsome, and had a great sense of humor.

After having seen him interact with Amy, Becca's young daughter, I also knew that there was a kind heart inside Ramón. There was something else, some part of him emerged when he was around Amy that seemed… better? Truer? I don't know exactly, but whenever I saw that part of him emerge I felt drawn to him. But, I wasn't available. So, nothing could ever happen between us. However, I also didn't want to lose him as a friend.

"You know that I'm seeing Gary, right?"

He laughed. "This wasn't about me hitting on you. I was just looking out for you, and I'd like to think that if some nut job was running around killing unbelievably handsome Hispanic men, that you would look out for me too."

I laughed. "Unbelievably handsome Hispanic men who are modest no doubt."

He laughed along and the tension broke.

"I thank you for looking out for me and being my friend."

"You're welcome, now tell me, what's the deal with the cutie?"

"I really can't say, but she's a friend."

"Ah, unrequited love, say no more."

"I won't. Now, where did that waiter go to?"

~

I WENT into the office the next day and Ron introduced me to Joe Ryan's wife, who was unfortunately now his widow. I was shocked by how young she was. I had heard that Joe had married a younger woman his second time around, but I had no idea that she was as

young as Blondie. She was also very good-looking. Even the long black dress she wore couldn't hide her figure.

Savannah Ryan was on her way out when I came in, and I offered her my condolences.

"Thank you, Miss Steele, and it's nice to finally put a face to the name. Joe spoke highly of you."

"He was a friend, and I'll miss him."

"Yes, well, I should get going."

After saying goodbye to her, Ron and I walked over to his desk.

"It's so sad that she's a widow at such a young age," I said.

"Yeah, Joe was twenty years older than her, but he still died too young, and now the cops think that it may have been Brenda who was responsible."

"Brenda?"

"Brenda has been arrested for suspicion of murder, Blue."

"They can't really think it's Brenda, can they? I mean why would she do it?"

Ron sat behind his desk and shook his head sadly.

"I can't believe it either, but I've lived long enough to know that anything is possible. They also say that there's blood evidence. They're testing it to see if it's Burt's."

I sighed as I settled into one of the chairs in front of the desk.

"Poor Burt, did you know that I've known him since I was a kid?"

"Yeah, he told me that, said that you were as much like your father as a girl could be. He and your dad were close, weren't they? He talks about him a lot."

"Yeah, they were close, and were actually partners once."

"Speaking of partners, Blondie was here earlier. She told me about the donation, thank you for that, it will take the fund past the fifty grand mark."

"You're welcome, but that was actually Blondie's money. Boggs was her capture. By the way, where is she?"

"She's doing a ride-along with George and Randy, helping them to transport two female prisoners back to lock-up."

"That's good."

"Why is that good, because it's relatively safe? Blue baby, tell me what really happened yesterday."

"Ron, I don't feel comfortable talking behind her back."

"Honey, I've lost three, possibly four people this month, I sure as hell don't want to lose another. Help me out here; I need to know if she's got what it takes."

"I'll tell you what happened, then I'll let you decide what it means, okay."

"Fair enough."

~

"IT SOUNDS LIKE SHE FROZE; she also showed damn poor judgment in going after a man like Boggs alone."

"She's young," I said. "And you have to make mistakes to learn from them."

"That's true enough, and I made many at her age, still, I'd appreciate it a great deal if you would keep looking out for her. There's no one better she could learn from."

"Listen Ron, as long as we are discussing Blondie, tell me more about her father."

"Matt Holden? Why?"

"I'm just trying to understand Blondie better by knowing more about her past. I remember that you said her father was mean, how mean?"

"I told you that I banned him from working here, but I didn't tell you the whole story. He used to beat his wife, but she never pressed charges and so I had no idea that it was happening. Then, one day she gets fed up when he started in on his little daughter, Susan, who is now Blondie. That's when I found out about it, and so I stopped using him. I won't have someone like that working for me."

"And you said he's dead?"

"Yeah, after the wife got rid of him, he snuck back into the house one night, raped her, and then blew his brains out in her bed. I remember that they thought she had killed him, but she came up clean for gunshot residue, and so they ruled it a suicide. Blondie was there, poor girl, she must have heard the shot. She was only a kid, ten at the most."

"Wow, that's some childhood; I'll keep her under my wing, Ron."

"Like I said before, there's no one better she could learn from."

I grabbed my purse and stood.

"Thanks for the compliment."

"It's well-earned, Blue, and many times over."

~

I LEFT THERE with a couple of minor skips who would likely be sitting at home watching TV when I came for them, but hey, they can't all be high-profile.

As I drove along, I thought about something that Ron said about losing four people. They were four, yes, but they were also the four who Blondie and I had trouble finding that day at the refinery. I began to wonder if somehow there was a connection. If there was, how did it involve this insane serial killer? And Blondie, what a father she had, I

guessed that explained the faded scars I saw on her back.

My phone rang. I checked the caller ID and was surprised by the name I saw.

"Brenda?"

"Yeah, it's me, Blue, and I guess you know that I was arrested."

"I heard."

"I'm out now, and I need to talk to you; it's important."

"What's it about?"

"I think I know who the serial killer is."

"The police seem to think it's you."

"Blue, you know me, why the hell would I start killing my friends?"

"Why the hell would anybody kill them; it's all insane."

"I need to talk to you, alone, but we can do it out in public if you're worried."

"How about Trinity Park, near the Mark Twain statue, say one o'clock?"

"Can we do it sooner?"

"I'm tracking down a skip and I'm parking near his house right now. If I catch him, I'll need time to process him."

"This is really important, Blue, and… I'm scared."

"Give me twenty minutes."

"Good, thank you."

I hung up as I looked over at the skip's house. He lived with his mom, who worked days as a nurse, and yet, I could see a lamp burning in a front window. He was probably home right now, an easy thousand-dollar bounty, but he would have to wait. I pulled away from the curb and headed for Trinity Park.

~

BRENDA DOWNING WAS in her fifties and had been a bounty hunter for almost twenty years.

She was a tough-looking woman who smoked, and like Burt Tucker, Brenda had battled alcohol and won. She smiled at me with relief showing on her face as I walked up to her.

"Thanks for coming, Blue."

"What's going on, Brenda? Why do the cops think you're a murderer?"

"I'm being framed."

"Framed, by who?"

"By that girl, Susan, the one they call Blondie."

"Blondie? Why would she frame you? Are you saying she's the murderer?"

Brenda stared at me then with an odd look, as she stomped out her cigarette.

"I think it's either her, or you, but I can't buy you. For one thing, I don't think that you would ever harm Burt."

"Of course not, he's like an uncle to me, but why would I have killed Marcus or Joe, or that other bounty hunter, the one from El Paso?"

"For money, Blue, I think that Blondie is killing us for the money."

"What money?"

Brenda pointed toward the river.

"Let's take a walk."

~

"THE ARMORED CAR ROBBERY? You found the money?"

"Hell, Blue, we found the armored car. It was just sitting inside that truck garage at the abandoned refinery."

"That's why you seemed so nervous that day, but why would the robbers have just left it sitting there with the money inside?"

"They didn't, they were there too, or one of them was, the other three were dead. It looked to us like greed had gotten the better of one of them, and he made a play for the money. One man had been shot in the back of the head; he was probably the first to go. All I know is that when we walked into that old garage, that truck was sitting there with the back doors open and the money still inside. The last member of the heist crew was still alive but dying. He was sitting on the floor and leaning back against the truck. He was so weak that he couldn't even lift his gun, and then he died… after that, it was just the four of us and the money."

"Oh Brenda, why didn't you guys just call the cops?"

"There's nearly two million dollars, Blue, two million, would you walk away from that?"

"Yes, if it wasn't mine. I can't believe that Burt was a part of this."

"A part? Hell, most of it was his idea. He had Marcus and Joe haul the money out of the armored car and place it all down in the floor."

"In the floor?"

"You know, one of those pits the mechanics use to stand in while they work beneath the trucks, for oil changes and such. Then, while the money was being hidden, Burt and I cleaned up the blood and tried to cover up the truck as well as we could with a bunch of old oil-stained tarps. The tarps hid it well, but it wasn't perfect, and so I went out to look for more of them. That's when I ran into you and Blondie."

"What about the robbers? What did you do with the bodies?"

"Once the money was out of the truck, they went into it, along

with the rags we used to clean-up the blood. Later that night we went back and moved the truck and the money."

"Moved it where? The cops are still looking for it."

"We buried it. Marcus used to work in construction for his brother's company. That night, he borrowed a flatbed truck and a backhoe. By morning, we had the truck and the money buried good and deep."

"Why bury the money?"

"We were going to be smart. We had a once in a lifetime opportunity for wealth fall in our laps and we weren't going to blow it. We were going to wait a year, let the heat die down, let the investigation go cold, and then dig up that money and divide it. It was half a million apiece, Blue. That kind of money could make life much easier, and who were we hurting?"

"What went wrong?"

"Joe Ryan was killed. He was the third victim of that serial killer. The rest of us thought that it was just a coincidence. We even made a vow to funnel his share of the money to his family, so we weren't greedy. I had no reason to think that Marcus or Burt had killed him for his share."

"But then Marcus was killed by a hit and run driver."

"Exactly, and that's when Burt and I grew wary of each other, that is, until he remembered something curious that had happened."

"What?"

"Burt said he spotted Blondie, and that it was right after we had buried the money."

"Where was this?"

"At a convenience store, he stopped to get a coffee and Blondie pulled in right behind him, like she'd been following him."

"It had to be a coincidence, where did it happen?"

Brenda gave me a sly look.

"I'm not telling you where the money is, Blue."

"And I'm not asking, but it had to be a coincidence, because Blondie's not the devious type. She wasn't following anyone; she was just stopping for a coffee or something."

"If that's true, then what happened to Burt? He told me that he was going to talk to Blondie, to feel her out and see what she knew. He disappeared right after that."

"Blondie?" I said, trying to wrap my head around her being a murderer. I couldn't buy it. "If Blondie were killing you four so she could have the money all to herself, why would she have killed the other three victims, she didn't even know them?"

Brenda shook her head. "That's not true of all of them. Burt looked into it and found out that Frank Quatro worked with Blondie's father

his first year on the job, and the guy from El Paso used to date her mother after her father's murder. Besides, their deaths muddy the water."

"Her father wasn't murdered; I thought that it was ruled a suicide?"

"That's another thing, Burt knew one of the cops on the case, from back in the old days. The guy retired two years ago, but he remembered the case. They tested Blondie's mother for gunshot residue, but not Blondie. She was in the house, Blue. Maybe she heard her father raping her mother and decided that enough was enough. He was found right there in the bed. The cop said that Blondie never shed a tear."

"So why didn't they test her?"

"Burt said that they knew her father was no good, figured if it did happen that way, that it was trauma enough for one life, and the girl was only ten."

We stood there by the shore as I absorbed Brenda's words and revelations. I looked back at the Mark Twain statue and saw a family of four each taking a turn getting their picture taken as they sat beside Twain on his bench.

"What are you thinking, Blue?"

"I'm wondering why you called me."

"That girl trusts you. Help me set a trap for her, something that will show the cops she's involved in those murders. If we can somehow do it without bringing up the money… I'll split it with you."

"To hell with the money, Brenda; you just told me that one of my friends might be a murderer. Forget about setting a trap. Go to the police, tell them what you told me, let them bring Blondie in and learn the truth, whatever it may be."

"But, it's almost two million dollars."

I looked at her in disgust. All she really cared about was the damn money.

"If you don't go to the cops soon, then I will. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, ah, damn it Blue, I shouldn't have said shit to you. Burt always said you were too much a straight arrow, just like your old man."

"I just try to do what's right, and yes, it's how I was raised. I'm disappointed in Burt. He should have known better."

Brenda charged at me and wagged her finger in my face.

"What are you, in your twenties? You're dating a rich lawyer, and everybody knows that you save every penny for that pie-in-the-sky horse ranch of yours. You've got decades to get ready for old age, Burt didn't and neither do I. I'm 56, Blue. Time is slipping away and I'm

looking at spending my old age in a trailer park. We didn't rob that armored car, we found it. It would just be plain stupid to hand that money back to people that don't need it. If I found that money tomorrow, I'd do it all again."

She backed away and glared at me and I met her gaze, but with less venom in my eyes.

"Brenda, please go to the police. Whether it's Blondie or someone else, someone is after that money and you're the last one who knows where it's hidden."

"Unless Burt talked, I keep thinking that that's why he's missing, that he's somewhere being tortured for what he knows."

I nearly laughed. I could see Blondie as a torturer even less than I could see her as a murderer.

"I'll talk to Blondie and find out what she knows."

"Be careful, Blue; she may look like an angel, but there could be a devil inside."

"That devil is in all of us, Brenda."

~

BLONDIE WASN'T ANSWERING her phone, and when I called in, Randy told me that she had left the office.

I returned to the house where my skip lived. I found him walking down the street with a beer in one hand and a cell phone in the other. I parked my truck across the street from him and walked over to confront him.

"José Muneaz?"

"Yeah?"

"You missed your court date. I'm here to arrest you and bring you in."

"What? You ain't no cop."

"No, I'm a bail enforcement agent, and you've forfeited your bail by missing your appearance. Now put away your phone, sit the can on the ground, and place your hands behind your back."

"Oh man, this sucks."

"You should have gone to court, then I wouldn't be here."

"Yeah, whatever."

Whatever, I hear that a lot. Whatever is not a good way to go through life.

~

I DROPPED José off and tried Blondie again. Still no answer, and that was very unlike her.

As I drove along, I heard a phone ring, but it was an unfamiliar ringtone. When I checked my phone, it wasn't ringing.

I pulled over to the shoulder of the highway, where I searched under the seats and found the source of the ringing. I had a second phone. It belonged to José Muneaz, the "whatever" guy. It must have slipped out of his pocket as we rode along. I was thinking about turning around and taking it back to the jail when my own phone rang. It was Gary.

"Hey honey, what's up?"

"I want to take you out to dinner tonight, and I'm talking fancy."

"On a Thursday night? What's the occasion?"

"I just have a craving for lobster, and I want to eat it while I'm looking at you wearing something slinky."

"That's a very specific craving, but I think it can be appeased."

"Good, I'll pick you up at seven?"

"Seven o'clock, I'll see you then."

I decided that I could return Muneaz's phone tomorrow, instead, I went shopping for a new dress, something slinky.

~

THAT NIGHT, I was at a five-star restaurant in Dallas and sipping on a glass of very expensive wine. Gary was too handsome for words in a new blue suit, and the atmosphere was romantic.

"So, what's the occasion? Did your firm snag a rich client?"

"I'm not celebrating business; I'm celebrating us."

"But our anniversary isn't for weeks."

He grinned. "Do I need a reason to spoil you?"

"No, spoil on."

The conversation stayed light over dinner, but as we ate dessert, the mood turned serious.

"I heard about the shoot-out at that strip club, you were nearly killed, weren't you?"

"I won't lie, it was dicey, but I wasn't hurt, I'm fine."

Gary ran his hand over his face, and I could tell that he was trying to contain his anger.

"Your job is so dangerous, and it kills me that you don't seem to care."

"I care, and I'm careful, but it is my job. It's what I do."

"What about your dream of owning a ranch?"

"I get closer to it every year."

"I already own a ranch. You could be living your dream tomorrow."

"What? You want to give me your ranch?"

“Well, my share of it could be yours… if you married me.”

Gary brought out a ring box and my jaw dropped. Despite the fancy restaurant, the expensive bottles of wine and the violins playing in the background, I had not expected a proposal.

“I love you. Marry me, Blue?”

I began crying tears of joy.

“Yes, yes I’ll marry you.”

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WE WERE LYING TOGETHER in bed, after having put the damn thing to good use.

Gary was holding me in his arms, and I swear that if I had been a cat, I would have been purring.

"A white dress?"

"Why not?" Gary said.

"The last few hours in this bed, for starters."

"That's old-fashioned. I can't wait to see you in a big white wedding dress."

"With a veil?"

"No veil, it's a crime to cover this face."

He kissed me, I kissed him back and we were nearly off to the races again, but then he said something that broke the spell.

"You'll have plenty of time to shop for a dress, now that you're no longer working."

"What?"

"The bounty hunting, that's over, I mean, you'll be living at the ranch, our ranch."

"You want to move to Bandera?"

"No, my firm is here, but I'll fly out every weekend to be with you."

I sat up in bed and Gary did the same.

"You want me to quit my job and go live at the ranch with your brother and sister?"

"No, I want you to quit your job and live out your dream of owning a ranch, while living with *our* brother and sister. Once we marry, they'll be your family too you know."

"I don't want to live in Bandera. I like this area, and Bandera is too far from my mama, my family."

"It's not that at all, is it? You just don't want to give up bounty hunting."

"I like being a bounty hunter, if I didn't, I would do something else."

"That's not the reason; the reason is that you're a danger junkie. It's why you're always chasing the most dangerous men you can find."

"I chase that type because they pay more, and the more I make,

the sooner I'll be able to buy a ranch."

"But you'll have a ranch. The second we marry, you'll be part owner of a ranch."

"In Bandera, which is three hundred miles away, and I'll only see you on the weekends. Gary, I don't want that life."

He gave me a look that told me I had hurt him, then, he got out of bed and put a robe on.

"Forget Bandera, forget the ranch, we'll live here, and spend the weekends there, how's that sound?"

I smiled. "It sounds better, much better, now come back to bed."

He snapped his fingers, as an idea just occurred to him.

"I have a former client who's also a friend. He's retiring, and he's selling his business in Arlington. It's a place where they board horses. That would be perfect for you."

"For me? How?"

"Oh, well, I just assumed that you'd want to work, at least until we began having children."

"I will work, as a bail enforcement agent. It's what I do and I'm good at it."

Gary shook his head. "No. Not once we're married. I have no right to ask you to quit as your boyfriend, but as your husband, I'll insist."

"Why do you hate what I do so much?"

"Because it's dangerous, and sooner or later, sooner or later you won't duck fast enough, or shoot quick enough… and I'll lose you. I can't stand what you do, Blue. I hate the fact that you're always in danger."

I got out of bed and grabbed my clothes.

"Why are you getting dressed?"

"I'm going home. I need to think and I'm going home to do it."

"What's there to think about? Go back to that dingy storefront office of Ron's and tell him that you're through with bounty hunting. You're getting married and your husband doesn't want you risking your life for peanuts anymore."

"What if I asked you to stop defending criminals, would you do it?"

Gary spread his hands wide.

"I'm a criminal lawyer; it's what I do."

"It's what you choose to do, why not practice contract law?"

He laughed. "I'd be bored to death if I did that."

"Right, and I'd be bored to death working in sales, or as a clerk. I like my job, I take bad people off the street and occasionally I get to help the good ones."

"You refuse to leave your job?"

"Refuse?"

"You know what I mean."

"Then yes, I refuse, and I'll tell you something else. You hurt me tonight. I thought you accepted me as I am, job and all."

"I'm sorry you feel that way, but I'm not going to marry someone who risks her life for a few thousand dollars. I can't spend my life living in dread."

I opened my mouth and realized that I had run out of things to say. I headed for the door.

"We'll talk tomorrow."

I opened the bedroom door, but then paused to take off the ring he had given me. Once I'd removed it, I sat it atop his dresser.

"I think you should hold on to this for now."

He didn't say anything in response, and I left.

~

I DIDN'T SLEEP at all. I loved Gary, but I wasn't going to change who I was just to make him happy, and I wouldn't expect him to do so either.

I knew he didn't like me being a bounty hunter because it could be dangerous at times. Still, I always thought that he trusted me and believed in me enough to realize that I was a professional, and that I knew what I was doing.

And yes, I did often risk my life, but it was never done for anything frivolous. I have saved lives by risking my own, and like my father, I find it a life worth living.

~

I MET Becca for coffee and told her what had happened. We've been friends our entire lives and she was closer to me than my own sister. We were supposed to have gone for a jog, but instead we ate chocolate donuts and talked.

By the time I said goodbye to her, I felt better, but no less confused about what to do.

After moping around the house until noon, I decided to stop by the office. I still hadn't heard back from Blondie, and it worried me. I also wasn't able to contact Brenda. If I didn't hear from her soon, I would call Diego and tell him what she told me about the fate of the armored car robbers. When I opened the door to the office, I walked in on a scene. George and Randy were there, along with Ron, and all three men looked as if they wanted to cry.

"Jesus, guys what's wrong?"

Randy released a deep sigh.

“Brenda’s dead, she shot herself.”

“What?”

“Yeah, and the cops are saying that she was the one who killed Joe and Marcus, along with Burt and those other guys.”

“What’s their proof?”

“They confirmed that Burt’s blood was found in her trunk, as far as Joe and Marcus, who knows.”

I almost told them that I knew it wasn’t true, but did I really? All I knew was what Brenda told me about what happened. I had no idea where they buried the truck or the money, and Brenda’s allegations seemed absurd. I commiserated with them a while longer, then I went outside and sat in my truck.

I thought about everything Brenda had said, I thought about what I knew of Blondie, and what I felt in my heart. I spent nearly an hour running things over in my mind, seeing where the different pieces did and did not fit, and when I was done, I was certain that someone I knew was a murderer.

My phone rang. It was Blondie.

“Hello Blondie.”

“Blue, I need you to meet me somewhere.”

“And where would that be?”

There was a pause, but then she spoke again.

“That old refinery, I need you to meet me there.”

“Are you all right, Blondie?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t sound like yourself?”

Another pause, but then, “I’m just bummed out; I had a fight with my boyfriend, Ramón.”

Good girl! I thought. She had managed to warn me.

“Blondie?”

“Yes?”

“Everything is going to be all right. Now hand the phone to him.”

“What?”

“Put Burt on.”

This time there was a long pause, but in the background, I could hear a slap, followed by a gasp.

“You always were a smart one, Blue. Who else knows?”

“Only me, and I just figured it out.”

“How?”

“Brenda and I talked yesterday. I thought over everything Brenda told me and realized that it all hinged on you. You were the one who told her all those things about Blondie, setting up the frame, and you’re the only one not confirmed to be dead.”

“Brenda never should have talked to you. This would all be over if

she never talked to you."

"Are you planning to kill me, Burt? Is that why you're using Blondie, to make me come to you?"

"Blue, I'm begging you. Split the money with me. Don't be pig-headed like your father."

"And then what happens to Blondie?"

"Maybe you trust her, but I don't… I'm sorry."

"I'm coming to the refinery. Don't you dare hurt her."

"It doesn't have to be that way, Blue."

"Yeah, Burt, yeah it does."

"I'm sorry, Blue."

"Don't hurt her; I'm coming."

"Yes, you are, and you're going to keep this line open while you do it. If I let you hang up, you'll call the cops."

"Put Blondie back on."

"No, and no more talking, but you leave the line open or I'll take care of her and then disappear."

"I'll leave it open, and I want to say one more thing. Think about what you're doing, Burt. Think about the man you used to be."

"That man died with my son. Now stop talking, and drive."

I started my truck and headed for the refinery. Facing him alone was far from ideal, but by making me keep the line open, he prevented me from using the phone to call the police. But then, when I remembered what was in my glove box, I nearly shouted for joy.

I had a second phone. It belonged to José Muneaz, the "whatever" guy. I still had his phone in my glove box.

When I was at a red light, I reached over and plucked the phone out of the glove box. Afterward, I dialed a number that I knew by heart. When the screen indicated that the call was answered; I began talking to Burt again, but this time I put the call on speakerphone.

"Burt, why did you kill Brenda? I think she would have split the money from the armored car with you."

"One million instead of two? No thank you… that is, unless you've changed your mind. I really don't want to hurt you, Blue."

"We'll talk things over when I get there, but that abandoned refinery is a big place; where do you want to meet?"

"Just come in like you did last time and I'll find you, now stop talking and just drive. I need to think."

I looked down at the other phone and saw that the line was still active, and that the other party must have heard the conversation.

"I'm almost there, Burt. I've just gotten off the Raytown exit."

"Fine, and remember, you'd better be alone."

"You made sure of that by making me keep this line open."

"Just being careful, now stop talking."

I stayed quiet as ordered and hoped that the other call worked. I knew that even if it did, that help wouldn't come right away, and I could already see the refinery looming ahead.

Six people, Burt had killed six people, and three of them were complete innocents. I thought of Blondie and said a prayer that the count of innocents wouldn't climb any higher.

~

BURT WOULD ASSUME that I'd enter through the hole in the fence, add that to his bad knee and an unwilling hostage, and I had a good idea where he would be lying in wait for me.

There was an old guard shack near the gate that offered a clear line of sight to the hole in the fence, while also granting concealment.

The chain link fence that surrounded the facility was old, but still formidable. It stood eight-feet-high and was covered with barbed wire on top. I parked my truck as close to the fence as I could manage, then scrambled up onto the truck's roof.

Burt's voice came over the phone.

"What's that noise?"

"I'm here; I just got out of the truck."

"I don't see you?"

"I'm walking toward the fence now; you'll see me soon."

I had grabbed a jacket from the cab of my truck. I draped it atop the fence, and then straddled it, I could still feel the painful pressure of the metal barbs digging into me, but they were rusted, and thankfully didn't cut through the jacket. Now came the tough part, getting down on the other side.

"I still don't see you, Blue."

"I'll be right there," I said, then I jumped the eight feet to the ground.

"What was that noise?"

"I tripped."

Pain shot through my left leg, but I was otherwise good and could come up on him from behind. It would cheat him out of the opportunity to shoot me as I bent down to crawl through the gap in the fence.

"Did you say you tripped? I couldn't hear you, the call is breaking up."

"It's the tanks; they interfere with the signal."

"Damn it, Blue, where the hell are you?"

"I'm right behind you."

I could just make out his forearm, it was sticking out the small window in the booth, but then he came out. He was holding Blondie

in front of him like a shield. She looked as frightened as I'd ever seen her.

"Damn sneaky, Blue, you don't trust me?"

"Has he hurt you, Blondie?"

"My left shoulder hurts; he twisted my arm behind me."

"Put that gun down, Blue, or the shoulder will be the least of her worries."

"I've changed my mind."

"What?"

"Let's split the money."

"And what about Blondie? Are you ready to do what needs to be done?"

"She can have half of mine."

"Can't risk it, she might talk or do something stupid."

I kept looking for an opportunity to shoot, but Burt held Blondie in front of him in a firm grip. His gun arm was resting on her shoulder, weapon aimed at me.

"She lives or there's no deal, and you know that I'm a good shot, Burt."

"I know; it's why I have to do this."

He fired twice, barely missing both times. I dropped to the ground and took aim at his legs. After his next shot passed through my hair, Blondie turned her head and sunk her teeth into his arm.

Burt screamed in pain but held on to his gun. Before I could stop it, he shot Blondie in the stomach. She fell to the ground as blood sprayed from her wound. I now had a clear view of Burt. I sent three shots into his torso, then scrambled to my feet as he crumbled to the ground. When I reached him, I saw him take his last breath.

"Blue?"

"I'm right here, Blondie, I'm right here. You saved me, kiddo. You saved my life."

"I love you, Blue."

"I love you too, Blondie, now you hold on and I'll get you to the hospital."

Her wound was serious, and there was so much blood, so damn much.

I had just helped her to her feet when I heard it. It was a helicopter. Help had arrived.

The facility had a helipad at its center, and the pilot set the craft down there. As Blondie and I inched toward it, three men came running toward us. One of them was the man I had called on the other cell phone. It was Diego Ramirez, the cop looking into the armored car heist, and a longtime friend.

"Where's the perp, Blue?"

“Dead.”

“Are you hurt?”

“No, but Blondie needs immediate help. Let’s load her in the chopper.”

The other men turned out to be FBI agents. They each took a side of Blondie, picked her up, and ran her toward the chopper. Seconds later, it was in the air, headed for the nearest trauma unit.

Diego and I talked as I led him over to Burt’s body.

“As you can guess, I got your call. It took me a minute to figure out what was happening, but once I did, I brought in the Feds.”

“Thank God you’ve had the same cell phone number for years. I knew it by heart.”

Diego stared down at Burt.

“Shit, Mr. Tucker? Hell, he was my little league coach back home. Was he one of the people who robbed the armored car?”

“No, he came in after that. It’s a long story, but let me tell it to you on the way to the hospital. I have to see how Blondie is doing.”

Two patrol cars pulled up at the gate. After I gave a brief statement, Diego and I left the scene with a promise to return. As I drove to the hospital, I told him the whole story.

Diego shook his head in disgust. “God, more lives ruined by the lure of easy money, and now it may be lost. There’s no one left alive who knows where it is.”

“I may have an idea there. I remembered earlier that years ago, when Burt’s father died, that the old man left him a piece of land near Dallas. I think that might just be where they buried it.”

“You may be right. I’ll have them check public records and find that parcel.”

~

DIEGO FLASHED HIS BADGE, and as we entered the trauma unit, an antiseptic odor filled my nose.

When I asked the nurse about Blondie’s condition she looked confused, and then I remembered.

“I’m sorry, Blondie’s her nickname; her name is Susan Holden.”

“Oh, honey, I’m so sorry, Miss Holden passed away. She died on the flight here.”

“What? Oh God, oh no… ooohh Blondie.”

I began crying and Diego hugged me, then he helped me to my truck and got behind the wheel. I cried some more. Blondie had saved my life, and the last words she ever spoke to me were to tell me that she loved me. I felt like a complete failure for not having saved her.

≈

MY HUNCH TURNED out to be right. The money and the armored car were found buried on Burt's property. Inside the vehicle were the corpses of the robbers.

The fact that the notes sent to the reporter had been written by a woman caused speculation that Burt may have had a partner. That ended when a hooker came forward after seeing Burt's photo on TV. She claimed that she wrote the notes for Burt. He paid her for performing that service, among others, but that she had no way of knowing that they were tied to murders. A check of her handwriting seemed to confirm her story.

I had spoken to Gary only once since the night of his proposal, but we had agreed to meet for a Sunday brunch in a small restaurant we liked.

Despite the out-of-the-wayness of the place, the shadowy booth, and his lack of appetite, I was as clueless about his intentions as I had been the night he proposed. And so, I was taken aback when he revealed them.

"You're breaking up with me?"

"I think it's best. I don't see how we can have a future together. I love you, Blue, I swear to God that I do, but I can't stand being with someone who is so… casual, about their safety, about their life. When your friend Blondie died, and you were nearly killed, I thought that maybe you'd see the light, but no, no, you just keep on going the same as always."

I heard every word he said, but I still asked the question.

"Is it Janelle? Have you gotten back together with her?"

"No, goddamn it. Did you not hear a word I just said?"

"No, I heard you. You find me unacceptable and if I don't change to please you, then there's no point in being together."

"I don't find *you* unacceptable. I find what you *do* unacceptable."

I stood. He wasn't going to change his mind and I'd be damned if I was going to beg him to.

I leaned over, kissed him on the lips, and walked away, while once again feeling like a failure.

I went home, and although it was barely past noon, I went straight to bed. When I awoke, my pillow was damp, and I knew that I had cried in my sleep.

My bedside clock told me that it was seven a.m., I moaned and headed for the shower. I had a funeral to attend.

≈

RON CAME to the funeral and held my hand throughout it. He knew that I had grown to love Susan, our Blondie, and that her death had affected me. Despite having recently lost so many of his people, he insisted that I take some time off. I took him up on it, although I had no clue what to do if I wasn't working.

That night, I sat alone in the dark, drinking, and thinking about my life.

I loved Gary, but he could not accept me as I am, and so once again I was alone. When I began thinking of Blondie, I poured a second drink. The amber fire flowing down my throat felt so good that I poured a third, then a fourth, and I kept pouring until I lost track, but I did become keenly aware of something else.

I did not want to be alone.

I don't remember getting in my truck or driving there, but I do remember running over a hedge when I arrived, of thinking, *Whatever*, and of hearing my own foolish giggling.

It was after two a.m. when he opened the door. I saw a look of surprise light his face and it was followed by a look of pleasure.

At least one man wanted to be with me.

"Chica? Are you all right?"

I smiled at Ramón, said, "It's your lucky day," then kissed him hard on the mouth. He took me in his arms and shut the door against the night.

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BLUE STEELE – VENGEANCE - Book 3 of the Blue Steele Series

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I WOKE up in a strange bed with my hair in a tangle, as if I'd been tossing and turning all night. There was also a steady throbbing in my skull that was so painful it made my face hurt. I then did something stupid. I opened my eyes.

The room was filled with light from a setting sun that made the throbbing in my skull beat faster. When I turned my face to the pillow to avoid it, I caught the masculine scent of its owner. I was in a man's bed, but whose?

I forced my eyes open again, just a crack, and gazed about the room. The bed I laid in was king-sized and matched the huge room. I realized that I could almost fit my entire apartment inside its dimensions.

Then I noticed the moldings, the filigree, and the stone fireplace. They told me that the house was very old. I had figured that out, but I still had no clue whose bed I had slept in. I continued looking around and saw no photos, but I did spot a hand drawn picture. I recognized it as the work of my nine-year-old niece, Amy. It was done in crayon and showed a tall man standing beside a little girl. The detail in the drawing was impressive and below the artwork was the caption—Me and My Hero, Ramón.

I was in Ramón's bed, and with that revelation, it all came crashing back.

Blondie was dead.

Gary had dumped me.

And I threw my drunken self at Ramón.

I hadn't made a fool of myself in quite a while, now it seemed like I had rectified that.

I got out of the bed slowly, and as I walked toward the adjacent bathroom, I noticed something.

I was fully dressed.

I wore every stitch I had arrived in except for my boots, which sat at the foot of the bed. So, I hadn't slept with Ramón, or, I should say, he didn't sleep with me, since my recall of the events after my arrival seemed non-existent.

My musing came to an abrupt ending as I felt the vomit rising in my throat. Thank God, Ramón had left the lid on the toilet seat up, or

it would have been quite a mess.

I left the room ten minutes later, wearing my boots and holding my head. I had been on the second floor of what seemed to be an old ranch house. I had dropped Ramón off at the door once at night but had never been inside. The place was huge, but I found my way to the living room where Ramón was watching football.

When Ramón saw me, he smiled and turned off the TV.

"Ah Chica, at last, I was beginning to worry. You slept most of the day."

I sent him a sheepish look.

"I'm sorry about this, and… I want to thank you for not taking advantage of me, although, I'm not sure I'd blame you if you had. I do recall giving you a very hot kiss, and did I shove my hand down your… I mean, did I…"

His grinned widened. "You have a very good grip."

"Oh God."

"I've seen drunk a time or two, and I knew you weren't yourself. This was about that girl Blondie dying, wasn't it? Is that why you drank so much?"

"Yes, that, and also because Gary dumped me."

"Really? Hmm, the man's a fool."

"I'm the fool. I drove here drunk. God, what a stupid, stupid thing to do. I could have killed someone. I could have killed myself. Maybe Gary is right when he says that I'm a danger junkie."

"He called you that?"

"Yes, he thinks that I risk my life unnecessarily."

"It's your life, not his, and I'd rather be shot at any day than be tied to a desk like he is."

"He loves being a lawyer, just like I love being a bounty hunter."

"To each his own, that's what I say."

I stared at him. "You know something, I still don't know what it is you do."

"I find people, same as you do; only I do it for more money."

"And who pays you?"

"The person or persons who want the person found."

"Do you ever refuse a job?"

"I have, but not often, and I never fail."

"Never?"

"Never! It's why I get more money. You hire me, consider them found."

"But wait a minute, when we first met you told me that I had once captured a man before you could, what about that."

"That man's name was Fred Evers, and I said that you got to him before I could, I never said that I wanted to capture him."

“Fred Evers?” I said, then I remembered. Fred Evers had been a pawn in a conspiracy that involved people high up in state government. After he was framed for embezzling millions in public funds, he ran, but I caught him near the Mexican border and brought him back. A day later, the truth came out and he was exonerated.

“You don’t consider Fred Evers a failure?”

“No, because the man who hired me cancelled the contract.”

“Who hired you to find him?”

“Fred Evers hired me.”

“He hired you to find himself?”

“He hired me to find himself a new self.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I know you don’t, but it was the closest I ever came to failing.”

“You’ve never failed? That’s not possible. At the risk of bragging, I’m about the best there is and my percentage runs about ninety-six percent.”

“Your work and my work aren’t exactly the same.”

“Then, explain it to me.”

“I can’t.”

“So… I still don’t know what you do. Is it illegal?”

“No, I can tell you that much.”

“A man of mystery, but someday I’ll figure it out.”

“And maybe someday I’ll just tell you.”

We became quiet then and stared at each other. I realized that it was the first time I’d ever been alone with him.

I looked around the room. There were bookcases against one wall and a desk with a laptop situated between them. The TV hanging on the wall was huge, but I saw no family photos. Then I remembered that Ramón was orphaned while young and had practically been on his own ever since.

He walked over and handed me my keys.

“You left your truck running; you also damaged the oil filter when you ran over the hedge. I fixed the filter and changed the oil, but I want you back here in three thousand miles.”

“Oh God, you did all that? Thank you. I love my truck. If I had totaled it, I’d never forgive myself.”

For a moment, I wondered if his handing me the keys was a hint that I should leave, but then he asked me a question.

“Are you hungry? I’ll fire up the grill and throw some steaks on.”

“I’m starving, but I’m also grubby and I have one hell of a headache. I think I’ll just grab some drive-thru on the way home.”

“Whatever you say, Chica.”

“Thanks for everything, Ramón. And I’m sorry about last night, it must have felt like a tease.”

“Yes, but it’s amazing what a cold shower can do.”

I kissed him. I didn’t think about it, I just did it, and… I liked it.

“More teasing, Chica?”

“A kiss of gratitude, for changing my oil.”

“I should have rebuilt your engine, then, things might get interesting.”

We laughed, and it lasted a little longer than it should have, as we realized that our friendship might be drifting toward something else.

He walked me out to my truck. Even in the dark I could tell that it was shining, along with everything else, he had also washed it.

I said goodnight, and this time it was with a peck on the cheek, but after I started the engine and as he was walking back toward the house, I called to him.

“Hey, do you know that I don’t even know your last name.”

“Acero, Ramón Acero, it means steel in Spanish.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes, fate hmm?”

I stared at him, wanting to say more, and wondering if I should have said yes to those steaks.

“What are you doing this weekend, Ramón?”

“I’ll be here, if I’m not working.”

“Do you wanna hang out, you know, a movie, maybe dinner?”

He said nothing for a few moments, but just studied me, as if he were trying to read my motives, but then he smiled.

“I would like that very much, Blue. Should I call you on Friday?”

“Yes, goodnight Ramón.”

“Goodnight, Blue.”

So, I was no longer, Chica, now it was Blue. Things had changed.

~

I AWOKE the next morning feeling much more human, even more so, after I ate a good breakfast.

I had the day off. Normally, that was a reason to spoil myself, but I still felt so bad over Blondie and my break-up with Gary that I didn’t feel worthy of being spoiled.

After drifting about my apartment and watching daytime TV, I made a decision. I was hurting, and I would do what I always did when I’d get hurt as a child. I’d run to my mama.

I was going home to Landsville.

~

MAMA MET me at the door with a hug and a kiss, but afterward, she

held me at arm's length and looked me over.

"My girl is in pain; what's been happening, baby?"

"Please tell me that you have some of your apple pie?"

"Apple and peach, I made them this morning."

"Then, let's talk over coffee."

I told her about Burt Tucker, about Blondie, and finally, about Gary. When I finished, she patted my hand.

"You've been through it, girl, and all at once, but… tell me more about this fella, Ramón."

I stared at her. I had only mentioned Ramón in passing as I told her about the shootout at the strip club, but she keyed in on that right away.

"He's a friend."

"A friend who followed you around making sure that no one harmed you, I think that's more than a friend, don't you?"

I smiled. I might as well tell her everything. Not much slipped by my mama.

"I got drunk the other night and went to see him."

She raised her head at that.

"And what happened?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"I was *drunk* drunk, Mama, first time in years. He saw that, and… he was a gentleman."

"Thank God for that, there are a lot of men that wouldn't have reacted the same way. What you did was stupid, girl, you're not gonna do that again, are you?"

"No, I've found another way to cope."

"And what's that?"

"Spending time with my mama," I said, and kissed her on the cheek.

~

"PREGNANT?"

My sister Jenny nodded at me, while smiling,

"Two months, I found out yesterday."

I let out a squeal and hugged her.

"I'm so happy for you. How's Chad taking it?"

"It's good, Blue, everything's good. When I told him last night, he walked over to his dresser and took out an engagement ring. He was already going to ask me to marry him, see?"

I looked down and wondered how I hadn't noticed the ring the moment she walked in the door. The diamond was huge. Jenny was

getting married and having a baby and I had just broken up with my boyfriend. I was glad to see at least one of us was happy, especially after the trouble she had last year, when her boyfriend at the time was murdered.

Then, a man named Chad Parker came into Jenny's life and she's never been happier. And now she's having a baby. I only hoped that I could turn things around as fast.

~

I STAYED with my family for two days and left there with my spirit feeling refreshed.

The drive home to Fort Worth takes about an hour. I used that time to think, and what I found myself thinking about the most was Ramón.

We'd first met when Becca's daughter, Amy, had been taken as a hostage by bank robbers. Ramón helped me get her back while risking his life to do it. Needless to say, he was a friend after that, and I never thought of him as being anything else, but then, I had been with Gary.

Ramón recently saved my life. Days later, he saved me from being a fool when he let me stay and sleep off a drunk. I liked Ramón, had always liked Ramón, and even found him a bit intriguing. I was beginning to wonder if maybe we were meant to be more than friends.

As I exited the highway, I made a call.

"Hello."

"Hi, it's Blue."

"What's up?"

"I… are you busy?"

"Not at all."

"I could be there in ten minutes. I thought maybe we could hang out, have a pizza… you know?"

"Make it nine minutes."

I laughed. "I'll shoot for eight, see ya."

"Bye-bye, Blue."

As I ended the call, I took a deep breath and began talking to myself.

"Okay, it's just pizza, maybe watch a little TV, no pressure, just a quiet afternoon with a friend. It's not like we're starting some big romance."

Or were we?

I didn't make it to his house in eight minutes. It took eight and a half.

His house was on a road where some of the homes, the older ones, were ranch houses like his, and spread wide apart; these were

interspersed with new cul-de-sacs that boasted McMansions.

As I went around the curve that led to his home, I saw some sort of commotion going on in front of it. As I drove closer, I could see people tussling with someone. The person was obscured by them, and so I couldn't see who it was.

I pulled into the semicircular driveway and got out of the truck, and that's when I saw Ramón. He was being shoved into the back of a van by three men. His face was bloody, and his wrists were bound behind his back. Ramón fought to stay out of van, but then he saw me, and his eyes went wide with fright.

"Run, Blue! Get the hell out of here!"

There was a woman with the men; she shouted out orders to them from the driver's seat.

"Toss him in the back and then kill that woman; she's seen our faces."

I reached into my truck and grabbed my purse. I wasn't working and had no reason to expect trouble, but I always carried a gun or kept one handy. I've learned from hard experience to be prepared.

As they tossed Ramón into the van, I fumbled my gun from my purse, then threw the purse back on the seat. With Ramón secured in the van, the three men now turned their attention on me. As the one in the middle brought his gun up, I fired.

The bullet hit the man in the chest, and he went down. His two companions returned fire as I dove to the ground behind a tree. I sent another shot their way, but then I saw the woman pass something out the window to one of the men. It was a rifle with a scope.

I'm not sure what kind of shells that thing held, but when the man fired it, it took a chunk out of the tree that was bigger than my fist. Outgunned and outnumbered, I decided that my best bet at staying alive was to run, to run and find someplace to hide. If I stayed out in the open, I would soon be dead.

I sprinted from the wounded tree and headed for the back of the property with the men giving chase. The property had once been a working ranch and I figured that there would be a barn or a garage or someplace where I could hide. After gaining concealment, I could work at taking the men down one by one, but when I rounded the corner of the house at the rear, I saw nothing.

There was just a flat field that stretched on for acres, with a few skinny trees and an old stone well. Out here, I was an easy target.

With the men in pursuit, I kept running, as a plan for survival formed in my mind.

So much for a quiet afternoon.

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THE TWO MEN rounded the corner of the house just as I hid from view.

Both men gazed right and left, but then their eyes fell on the well. I was not completely hidden, but I prayed to remain unseen, because if I were spotted, I would surely be killed.

The man with the rifle elbowed his friend, then tossed his chin at the landscape before them. There were several trees scattered about, mostly Pin Oaks and two Pecan trees, but they were all young and their trunks were too narrow to hide behind, but then the man pointed at the well, and both he and his friend smiled.

They strode toward the well with determined gaits. As they drew nearer, the man raised the rifle, readying the gun to fire death down the well's dark hole.

They nodded their heads while silently counting down from three, then they rushed the well to release a barrage of shots.

When I killed the first man, the one with the gun, he still had a perplexed look on his face. I knew that he was wondering just where the hell I had gotten to.

As his partner fell dead at his feet, the second man swung the rifle around, but I had already taken a bead on him and I fired two shots into his belly.

As he doubled over in agony, the rifle slipped from his grasp and tumbled down into the well. It clanked off the damp stones inside, before splashing into the water below.

I climbed down from the Pin Oak. I had guessed that they would focus their attention on the well, and I had guessed right. If they had only looked up, they would have seen me among the leaves and the rifle would have sealed my fate.

The rifleman was writhing about in agony and was giving no thought to his partner's weapon, which lay only a foot from his fingertips.

I picked up the gun and left him to his pain as I headed back to the front of the house to deal with the woman and free Ramón. But, as I turned the corner of the house, the van was in sight and the woman and I locked eyes.

She was about forty, good-looking, with fair hair, and eyes as

green as my own, eyes that widened as she realized what seeing me meant. It meant that she was alone.

She leaned out the window and fired a shot behind her. I heard the accompanying *POP!* and realized that she had just shot out one of my tires.

I ran toward the van with my gun extended, but knew that I shouldn't fire, or I'd risk hitting Ramón. As the van sped away, all I could do was memorize the plate and description and hope that they would lead to her. Then, I remembered that there remained one left behind, and I ran back toward the wounded rifleman.

He was dead, laying in grass stained red from his wounds and staring up at the sun. I went about checking all three men for anything that might lead me to Ramón, but found only typical wallets, key cards for different motels, and a spare magazine for a gun.

It was time to call the police.

~

"TELL me again why you murdered those men?"

I looked into the face of Detective Horace Whitaker as I began to wonder if he was a moron.

"It wasn't murder; it was self-defense, as I've already stated four times."

When two uniformed officers responded to the scene at Ramón's house, I greeted them with my hands empty and held high. The two officers acted in a reasonable and professional manner and I explained to them what had taken place. I was glad to see that they were efficient and well-trained and began to hope that Ramón would soon be found safe and unharmed.

And then, I met Detective Horace Whitaker.

His first act upon greeting me was to leer at my breasts, then he accused me of murder. I also got the impression that he knew Ramón, or perhaps he just referred to every abductee as, "That uppity Hispanic dude."

I was at a police station and being held inside a grubby interrogation room that was about the size of my bedroom closet. For over three hours, I'd been repeating the same story and getting the same allegations back. Whitaker seemed determined to get me to confess to murder, why, I had no idea. Maybe he needed one in the win column to keep his job, or maybe it was something else, but he was wasting valuable time, time that Ramón didn't have.

I pushed down my anger once more and attempted to get an answer.

"What's being done to find Ramón?"

Whitaker leaned back and focused his eyes on my breasts again.

"You and this Ramón an item?"

"What? That has nothing to do with anything."

He licked his lips and sighed.

"I was just wondering. A man looks at you and he can't help but wonder… and imagine."

I crossed my arms tightly over my chest. This served two purposes. One, it kept Whitaker from staring at my breasts, and two, it kept me from reaching across the table and strangling him.

The door to the room opened and a man stepped in. Everything about him said Fed, but he appeared intelligent and he was looking at Whitaker as if he were something he'd stepped in.

"Detective, get out, this is no longer your case."

"Who the fuck are you?"

The man flipped his credentials at Whitaker. Whitaker read them, and I swear, his lips moved as he did so. Afterward, Whitaker gawked up at the man.

"Thomas Lawson, Homeland Security? Shit, is she a terrorist?"

"Leave, Detective, now, and if I find out that you watched us through the glass, you'll no longer be a detective."

Whitaker made a face at Lawson then left the room.

Lawson sighed as he took a seat across from me.

"On behalf of law enforcement, I apologize for him."

"What's being done to find Ramón?"

"We found the van abandoned. It had been stolen earlier in the day. There's an alert out on your friend. The ID's on the three men who tried to kill you were phony. We're running their DNA through all available databases but getting a match could take weeks."

It was the long way of saying that they had nothing, but at last, someone had told me what was going on.

"I killed those men in self-defense."

"I understand that, and that's how it's being written down. The prints from two of the men came back as matching prints found at the site of a terrorist attack. That's why I'm here. Those men were all terrorists; you did the world a favor."

"Terrorists? Why would terrorists kidnap Ramón?"

"I was hoping you might know the answer to that, Miss Steele."

"I have no idea, but I know he's not involved with them."

"We don't think so either, but I have some photos I'd like you to look at; please tell me if you recognize anyone."

Lawson laid a six-pack of photos on the table. All of the six women resembled one another, but it was number three that got my attention.

I jabbed a finger at the picture.

"That's the woman that drove the van."

"You're absolutely certain?"

"Yes, who is she?"

"Natalie Stone, or at least that's her most frequent alias."

I stared at him. He was being very forthcoming for a Fed.

"Why are you being so honest, revealing so much to me?"

"A mutual acquaintance has vouched for you."

"What mutual acquaintance?"

Lawson started to answer, but then he eyed the one-way mirror and decided to choose his words wisely.

"The man I'm speaking of is often referred to by the name, Mr. White. You and he were recently involved in the apprehension of a date rapist, one Owen Leonard."

"I know who you mean, but I wasn't aware that he had federal connections."

"It's a recent development."

"Am I free to go?"

"You are, but I'm hoping that you'll stay."

"Why would I stay here?"

"Mr. White not only vouched for you, he also recommended that I allow you into the investigation."

"And you're letting me in?"

"I am, but only in the area of the search for your missing friend."

I stood. "I want to see everything you have on the dead men. Were their residences searched?"

"Yes, the licenses were phony, but they all had key cards on them for various motels. We confiscated everything we found, but no one has had a chance to sort through it all yet."

"I'll do that. Take me to it."

~

THERE WASN'T MUCH, considering it belonged to three people, but then, terrorists staying in motels wouldn't have many personal items.

I went through everything twice and only came up with one possible clue.

Lawson held up the two packs of cigarettes.

"I don't get it; this is a very common brand."

"Each one of those packs belonged to a different terrorist, but check out the numbers on the packages."

"They're almost identical; what does that mean?"

"I think it means that they were purchased at the same store. Most people purchase cigarettes near their place of business or close to their homes, but these men all lived miles apart in different motels. The cigarettes were likely bought where they work, or in this case, where

they scheme."

Lawson nodded. "And once we know where they buy their cigarettes, we'll have an idea where they operate."

"Isn't there some database that you'll be able to cross-reference that information with?"

"Maybe, we do keep certain groups and individuals under observation. Good work, Miss Steele."

"What else can I do?"

"There's not much else to do now but wait."

And so, that's what I did.

~

2:11 A.M.

I WAS asleep while sitting in a chair in the police station's break room when Lawson woke me by tapping me on the shoulder.

"Hey, what's happening?"

"We have an address. It's in Dallas. Natalie Stone is known to have visited there five years ago and the cigarettes were both purchased at a nearby store. I'm leaving now with a swat team; would you like to observe?"

I stood up and grabbed my bag.

"I'd like to lead the assault, but I'll settle for observing, and thanks."

~

THE DRIVE TOOK ONLY fifteen minutes because they had lights and sirens blaring and the driver was a maniac. That said, he was a skilled maniac, and we parked a block away from a club named O'Leary's Lair.

After a short talk with the local authorities, the assault team hit the place. The club had been closed for nearly an hour, but there were still people on the premises. I would bet they all got the shock of their lives. Even sitting a block away inside the van, I could hear the stun grenades.

When it was over, two people were dead, while four were arrested, and a badly beaten Ramón was helped outside by a black-clad assault team member.

I reached him just as they were loading him into the ambulance.

"Blue! Oh, thank God, I thought they had killed you."

I touched his face gently. One eye was swollen shut from the

beating and his nose was obviously broken. They had also fractured one of his fingers, and there were dozens of bruises across his torso.

"You're safe now."

"You helped to find me, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Thank you, the man that did this to me was running out of patience. He was headed toward me with an electric carving knife when they shot him."

"We'll talk later; right now, we'll get you to the hospital."

Ramón let out a cough and nodded.

"Yes, a hospital sounds good."

I rode along and held his hand. Every once in a while, he would arch his back as if he were in great pain, and I wondered if he had internal injuries. Once we were at the hospital, they separated us and told me that he was headed for a complete examination.

He called to me from the gurney.

"Blue!"

"Yes?"

"I still want that pizza."

"As soon as you're up to it," I said, and then I sent him a wink, along with a sexy smile.

He answered me in words that made me laugh out loud.

"It's deep dish, if you know what I mean."

Then, the doors swung shut behind him, and once more, I waited.

~

RAMÓN AWOKE at noon and caught me eating the applesauce that came with his tray of hospital food.

"You stayed all night?"

"Yes."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome; now tell me what's going on."

"I'd like to know that too."

The voice came from the doorway and I turned to see Lawson standing there. I introduced him to Ramón.

"That woman, Natalie, did you catch her?" Ramón asked.

"No, she's still in the wind, but we're looking." Lawson said.

"So is she, and she's looking for Colin Talbot."

Lawson straightened at the name, but it had no meaning to me.

"Who's Colin Talbot?" I asked.

Lawson grabbed a chair from the other side of the room and sat near the bed.

"Colin Talbot was an Irish terrorist who turned against his friends

and leaked information about several groups. He did that for years, but then suddenly vanished. We presumed that he was dead, killed by his own people."

Ramón shook his head.

"He's alive and well, and he was never a terrorist. He and Natalie Stone fell in love while she was pretending to be someone else. Once Colin learned the truth, he stayed with her to pass on information to the authorities as an informant. On the day he had planned to leave her, Natalie revealed her pregnancy to him. He then stayed until their daughter was born, only to snatch her away from Natalie. She's been searching for them ever since."

"How do you know this?" Lawson said.

"I know, because I'm the one who hid him and his daughter away."

"Natalie Stone really has a daughter?"

"She does, and she's five-years-old now."

Lawson made a "huh," sound.

"So that's why she's here in Texas. It must also be why she was here five years ago. She must have tracked Talbot to this state."

"Yes, Colin and I lost her five years ago, but now it looks like she's learned of my involvement."

"What group do you work for?"

"I don't work for a group."

Lawson leaned back in his seat. "What are you, CIA?"

Ramón laughed loudly, but then winced as the effort made his injuries act up.

"I'm just someone who saw an opportunity, Mr. Lawson. I created a private witness protection program, but instead of funding it through tax dollars, my witnesses pay me to make certain that they disappear."

I took Ramón's hand. "Is that what you do? But you told me that you find people."

"And I do, I find people for other people to be. The reason I have a perfect record at finding people, is because I'm the one who creates them, I create the false identity. Say you're a dissident from a foreign country who's been marked for death and you don't trust the government, any government, that's where I come in. I'll find you a new identity and a safe place to spend the rest of your life. I'll also provide around the clock security."

"How is that possible?" Lawson said.

"Trade secret, but trust me when I tell you that Colin Talbot and his daughter are safe."

"You mean that they were safe. Natalie Stone almost made you talk, if she had, Talbot and his daughter would be looking at her right now. Tell us where they are and we'll protect them."

“No, and just so you know, even if I had given up their location, they would remain safe. It’s built into the system.”

“How much do these people pay you?”

“It varies, it’s been as high as millions and as low as a single dollar, but all of it is used to make it happen, and to support the system.”

“Intriguing,” Lawson said.

“Yes, it is,” I said, while looking at Ramón with new eyes.

“Natalie Stone still believes that you know where her daughter is and she’ll keep coming, let us protect you.”

“Of course I will, but I want Blue protected too.”

“I agree. She killed three of Stone’s people; they’ll want revenge. I’ll set up teams at each of your residences.”

“Actually,” I said. “I’ll be staying at Ramón’s, at least until he heals.”

“You will?” Ramón said.

“I will, unless I’m not wanted.”

Ramón looked over at Lawson.

“She’ll be staying with me.”

“Forgive me for saying this, but I hope Natalie comes for you again. It’ll give my people a chance to catch her.”

“I wouldn’t mind another chance at her too,” I said.

Lawson rose out of his seat and shook Ramón’s hand.

“Someday you’ll have to explain this private witness protection program to me.”

“It was bad enough that I spoke of it at all, and I hope you’ll keep it to yourself.”

Lawson smiled enigmatically.

“I’m a man of many secrets; in fact, it’s part of my job.”

Lawson left, and I realized that I was still holding Ramón’s hand.

“Is it my imagination, or does your speech seem less… street, than usual?”

“I think the reason that I help to hide people is because in some ways, I’ve spent my life hiding from people.”

“And you’ve been hiding your true self from me?”

He gave my hand a squeeze.

“I realized the other night that I no longer wanted to hide from you.”

I leaned over and kissed him.

“Come on out and play.”

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RAMÓN WAS RELEASED from the hospital two days later.

When he returned home, I stayed with him. He was moving slow because of the beating, but he was on his feet, and the bruises on his face were beginning to fade.

Lawson left three men to guard us. They shared one of the home's large bedrooms, while I stayed in another. I felt a bit odd to be staying in a separate room from Ramón, but despite our growing closeness toward each other, we had yet to do more than kiss. I doubted that we would become physical until his internal injuries healed.

I had called my boss, Ron, and told him that I needed to take a leave of absence, and he grudgingly agreed. I felt bad about asking, because I knew that he had yet to replace the people we'd recently lost, but time off was something I needed. In truth, I was actually self-employed.

~

RAMÓN and I were sitting on the patio at the rear of the house.

We had just come back from taking a walk around the property after dinner. I was happy to see that he had walked considerably farther than the day before.

"Are you feeling stronger today?" I asked.

"Yes, there's less pain inside, the doctor told me that the beating bruised my organs and caused them to swell, but that in time the pain would go away. I'm happy to see he was right."

We were sitting together on a wooden bench and I moved closer and placed my arms around him.

"Does that hurt?"

"No."

I held him tighter and then gave him a long kiss on the mouth.

"What about that, did that hurt?"

"No, but if you keep this up, swelling will occur in a certain area."

I laughed and kissed him again. He kissed me back, and soon our hands began exploring, but when I touched a spot on his left side, he hissed and pulled back.

"Are you all right? Did I hurt you?"

“A little, I guess I’m still not quite ready for… strenuous exercise.”

I gave him a quick kiss on the lips.

“But you will be ready, and when you are, you let me know.”

“You’ll be the first to know, Chica, believe me.”

I pulled back from him. “Don’t call me that.”

“What? Chica?”

“Yes, it’s what you called me before, before you let me in, before you let me see the real you.”

“And now you are Blue.”

“And I want it to stay Blue. I don’t want to go back. I want to go forward. I need to go forward.”

He took me in his arms and kissed me, then leaned his head back and stared into my eyes.

“There’s something I want to show you.”

~

I STOOD in the middle of the attic and gazed about. Everywhere I looked, I saw beauty.

Paintings, dozens of paintings, most were representational, but some were abstracts, and I marveled at all of them.

“You’re an artist.”

Ramón shrugged. “I paint. It started as a hobby, but lately I’ve begun selling them on online auction sites. I did it mainly to display them, because until then, I was the only one who had ever seen them. Then they began selling, one even sold for five grand. I was amazed; I never thought that anyone would pay that much.”

“Ramón, I’m awestruck. These are all so beautiful, you have quite a talent.”

“Thank you; take any one you want, except that one in the corner. That one stays mine.”

I followed his gaze to a back corner of the room and saw a painting hanging on the wall. It was a painting of me, done from memory. In it, I was wearing my boots and jeans, and I stared straight ahead with a slight smile on my face.

“Wow, it looks like me, only better.”

He came up behind me and placed his arms around my waist; I instinctually leaned back against him.

“That’s how I see you.”

I turned in his arms and kissed him again.

“You are so not who I thought you were. Tell me more about yourself. I want to know everything.”

~

“COMPTON, CALIFORNIA?” I said.

“Yes, my father was a gangbanger and my mother was a part of it too. He was killed by a rival gang when I was six. My mother died of an overdose when I was nine.”

“God, what a childhood.”

“The gang was all I knew. After my parents died, I grew up as a banger on the streets, and I know that you’re worldly enough to know exactly what that means.”

“Yes, it means drug dealing. And it means committing acts of violence, often against innocents… and even murder.”

He studied my face for a reaction to what he was telling me.

“That’s not who I am, but who I was, still, I’ll understand if my past is a deal breaker.”

We were sitting together on the sofa in the living room, a bottle of wine on the coffee table before us, and a blazing fire to warm the chilled night. I snuggled closer and laid my head on his shoulder.

“Keep talking.”

“All right, well, although I had stopped going to school in the fourth grade, I had always been a reader and I loved anything to do with history and philosophy. By the time I was sixteen I knew that my life was being wasted. After struggling with it for a while, I went to someone for help.”

“Who?”

“His name was Walter Calvin. He was a former priest. He ran a refuge for people who wanted to leave the gangs, but when I first went to him, he refused me.”

“Why would he do that?”

“I wasn’t just a street soldier; I was an officer in the gang. Walter thought that I was up to something.”

“So, what did you do?”

“I tried leaving on my own and it didn’t go over well. The other gang leaders wanted me dead and they nearly made it happen with a drive-by shooting. After that, Walter believed me. The next day I was at a camp out in the Texas desert, which is where he taught people like me the skills we would need to transition. It was also where I realized that I liked to paint.”

“And so, you got a second chance?”

“It was more like a rebirth. Walter Calvin became my father, priest, teacher, and my life counselor, all rolled into one. I owe what I am today to his guidance.”

“How long were you at the camp?”

“I stayed at the camp for years and worked as a counselor, and later I moved to El Paso and became a bounty hunter.”

“You were a bounty hunter?”

“For a short time, and then I worked as a bodyguard, but that ended when I started hiding people and offering my brand of witness protection. Now I have to be ready to move at a moment’s notice.”

“I thought that you worked for Chaney, the mobster, you helped him out with Ernesto Roberts last year.”

“That was a favor for a friend. I once saved Chaney’s daughter from a guy who jumped her in a parking lot. We’ve been friendly ever since.”

“Chaney, or his daughter?”

He smiled. “At one time it was both, but the daughter and I parted ways a while ago.”

“When did you buy this house, and why? It’s so big.”

“Where did you grow up?”

“Me? In Landsville, on a farm.”

“With chickens and pigs and such?”

“No pigs, but we do have chickens, it’s a small farm and my family has always rented out the land to the farm next to ours.”

“I grew up eight to a room in tiny apartments and drug dens. The only pets I saw were roaches and rats. I bought this place because it’s so different from where I grew up, and I’ll probably farm it someday, I also want to learn how to ride a horse.”

“I can teach you to ride, and I love horses.”

“I’m going to hold you to that when I get better; it’s something I’ve always wanted to do.”

One of Lawson’s men came down the hall, stood in the doorway, then cleared his throat. His name was Burns. Of the three agents guarding us, he was the most senior, also the most personable, while the other two stayed to themselves.

“Yes?” Ramón said.

“Lawson is on his way here; he asked me to tell you.”

“Is there news about Natalie Stone?” I asked.

“I don’t believe so, but Thomas will fill you in.”

“Thank you,” Ramón said, and Burns went back to the kitchen.

“I hope they caught her,” I said.

“Why, are you getting cabin fever?”

“No, surprisingly no, but I worry that they’ll try to hurt you again. You still have information that she wants badly.”

“Personally, I hope they never find her.”

“Why not?”

“Because then maybe you’ll never leave here.”

~

LAWSON SHOWED and gave us news.

“One of the men arrested at the club has decided to make a deal and talk. The first thing he told us is that Stone is obsessed with getting her daughter back. She won’t stop coming after you until you reveal her daughter’s location. The second thing he said is that there are more men on the way, and with that in mind, I’d like to move you two out of here and to someplace safe. We can find look-a-likes to play you.”

“Look-a-likes? That won’t fool anyone watching through a scope,” I said.

“Well keep them inside, mostly; it’s for your own protection.”

I looked at Ramón.

“Do you want to go? Because I don’t.”

“No, you’re right, body doubles won’t fool anyone, and besides, they’re trying to capture me again, not kill me.”

Lawson sighed. “I thought you’d say that. In any event, we’ve rented a house half a mile away and I’m placing back-up inside it. If they do attack, we’ll have reinforcements ready.”

~

ANOTHER WEEK WENT by without incident, but as we were outside walking about the property, Ramón surprised me by breaking into a run. When I caught up to him, he smiled.

“That felt good, and there was no pain; I think I’m finally on the mend.”

“That’s good to know,” I said.

Later that night, I tapped on the connecting door between our two bedrooms. I had debated wearing a negligee, but I didn’t want to broadcast my expectations or move too quickly if he still wasn’t… up to it. I was barefoot and wearing a pair of shorts along with a T-shirt that displayed my midriff.

Ramón opened the door and smiled.

“I was hoping you’d stop by; there’s something I want to show you.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Oh really?”

“You have a dirty mind, thank God, but it’s actually something else.”

He handed me a handmade card. It was from Amy, Becca’s daughter. It showed her and Ramón together in a park-like setting. It was well drawn, and a step-up from her earlier artwork.

“It’s good, huh?” Ramón said, “I think that kid might be another artist.”

“Becca says that Amy still talks about you all the time.”

“There was an invite for dinner included with the card; I think I’ll

stop by and see them once Natalie Stone has been handled."

"They'd like that, can I come too?"

"You mean like a couple?"

I walked over and sat on the bed.

"Yes, like a couple."

I moved my things into his bedroom the next day.

~

TWO DAYS LATER, I was beginning to think that Natalie Stone's plans had changed, but then she sent an army at us.

Lawson was there. He had come calling to tell us that he had cancelled the back-up troops at the rented house because they were needed elsewhere. Then, we introduced to a man that he simply called, Jace. Lawson told us that Jace was a special consultant who would be staying with us. Jace was so young that I had been thinking Lawson had brought his son along.

Jace looked me over from tip to tail, but it was not so much a leering as a stare of admiration.

As we all walked Lawson out to his vehicle, they struck.

A yellow school bus turned at the corner and came slowly down the street; no one thought anything of it, until Ramón stated a fact.

"Lawson."

"Yes?"

"This road dead ends at the Miller farm, and we're the only two homes on the street. Neither one of us has kids."

Lawson spoke to his men. "Check it out."

Two of the men broke off and headed for the school bus. As they stepped off the curb, the door slid back on the bus and armed men in camouflage fatigues began pouring out.

The two men that were headed toward the bus went down in a torrent of bullets as everyone else dived behind Lawson's SUV, accept for Jace. Jace took out a gun and scrambled beneath the vehicle. Lawson pointed toward the front door of the house, and his man, Burns, shook his head.

"We'll never make it, Thomas, we're pinned down."

I looked at the gun in Lawson's hand, then reached over and flipped off the safety.

He sent me an embarrassed grin.

"I'm not a field agent."

"You are today."

He nodded at me and then fired a shot as he peeked around the car.

"I counted eight men," he said grimly.

Ramón was unarmed, but I had been wearing a snub-nosed .38 in an ankle holster. I leaned around the car and fired a shot that entered the left eye of an attacker.

"Now there are seven."

Losing one of their own seemed to madden our attackers. They simultaneously emptied their magazines at the rear of the vehicle. Ramón pressed me to the ground and covered me with his body. I feared the worst when I heard a shout of pain, but it wasn't Ramón who cried out, it was Burns, he had taken a bullet to the chest.

Lawson called to him. "Hang in there, Jerry, and we'll get you help."

Burns wheezed in reply and grimaced from the pain of his wound, as Ramón reached over and plucked his weapon from the ground.

The firing died down, but then resumed, however this time the sound had changed. It was Jace, and he was firing a Desert Eagle. He had scrambled out from beneath the car and shot the men as they changed magazines. He then dived back beneath the vehicle, and as he came out the rear to join us, he was grinning.

"I got three of the fuckers."

I grabbed Lawson's arm.

"It's four against four now, we'll never have a better chance, but we have to take the fight to them. If we stay here and snipe at them we'll run out of ammo, and for all we know there are more coming."

Lawson appeared a bit lost and looked over at Jace.

"What do you think?"

"She's right, but it can't be a frontal assault; we need to divide their attention first. I'll do that by running to that oak tree by the curb."

I looked over at the tree.

"It's too far."

"I can make it, and while they're aiming for me, you can take them out."

I held up my gun. "I got lucky once, but this gun is no good for distance."

Jace shoved the Desert Eagle at me as he took my gun.

"Use mine, there's one chambered and four left in the mag."

"They're coming!" Ramón shouted, and he and Lawson fired.

Jace looked at me. "Ready?"

"Yes, but you'd better run like hell."

He sent me a wink and said, "Go!"

He sprinted out from behind the car and I stepped out an instant later. All four gunmen were training their weapons on him. I locked my arms, took aim, and fired.

My first shot was a little high, but the .50 slug still ravaged an ear

of one of the men. My next shots hit center mass on man two and man three. Ramón hit the last man twice in the stomach, but not before the thug had fired a shot that sent Jace tumbling past the tree and into the road, where he laid still.

I had taken a step to go check on Jace, when the man I'd wounded in the ear fired a volley of shots.

I dived back behind the car. "I'm out!"

Ramón held up his weapon and shook his head, as Lawson did the same.

The man with the bloody ear inched closer, but when no one fired at him, he figured it out.

"You're all out of ammo, aren't you?"

Ramón kissed me.

"Run! Gun or not, I'll hold him off long enough for you to get away."

"I'm not running; we'll face him together."

He shook his head. "Such a woman."

The man appeared in front of us with a bloody left ear. He pointed at me and Ramón.

"You two she wants alive, but you…"

He shoved Lawson to the ground with a kick then aimed his gun at him. He never got the chance to fire. Jace shot him twice from behind, and then came limping over, as the heel of one boot was missing.

He sent me a wink.

"Good shooting hot stuff, but that last prick got lucky and made me trip, knocked the damn wind out of me. Yo, Lawson, why are you sitting on the ground?"

Lawson held out his hand and Jace grabbed it and helped him up, but when he tried to let go, Lawson held on.

"Thank you, Jace."

"Anytime, boss man."

~

AGENT BURNS SURVIVED the shootout but was in critical condition.

Ramón and I were escorted to the FBI offices in Fort Worth and told that Lawson would be joining us soon. Soon turned into over an hour, but then Jace arrived with cheeseburgers, fries and milkshakes.

"Lawson sent me to keep you company and I figured you'd be hungry."

"Thanks, Jace, how is Burns doing?"

"That bullet jacked him up, but they say he'll live. Lawson stayed to talk with the guy's wife."

"You saved us out there, Jace. If you ever need anything, just ask,"

Ramón said.

"This Natalie chick really wants you, huh? But she lost eight more, how many can she have left?"

Ramón and I looked at each other.

"That's a good question," he said.

~

WHEN LAWSON SHOWED up a half hour later, Ramón and I asked him how large Natalie's organization was.

"As you can imagine, it's a little difficult to know for certain, but Stone's outfit has been in tatters since her husband betrayed her. Those men we faced today were mercenaries, so it looks like she's been forced to hire out. We've also uncovered evidence that suggests she's back in Europe, London to be precise."

"Then that's where we're going," I said.

"Yes," Ramón said, "We're through waiting around for an attack. It's time we took the fight to her."

Lawson stared at us as if he thought we might be joking.

"You're serious?"

"Yes, but we'll need your help. For starters, we'd like any info you have on her organization, such as known members and where we're likely to find them."

"The two of you want to take on a terrorist organization. That insane!"

"No, Lawson, it's more or less what I do. I'm a bounty hunter; I track criminals for a living. Natalie Stone is just one more criminal and she won't even see us coming, especially with your help."

Lawson reached into his briefcase and took out an envelope, which he then handed to me.

"That's the key card for a hotel suite. For your safety, two sheriff's deputies will escort you there and stand guard. I will meet with you tomorrow morning and we'll talk, but understand that in no way, shape, or form, can I condone what you're planning. I would advise you to forget the idea. Are we clear?"

I sighed. "We're clear, but what makes you think that the hotel will be safer than returning to the house?"

"It's just for one night. In fact, enjoy it, order room service, get a massage, you both deserve it after what you went through today."

~

LATER, at the hotel, Ramón and I lay in bed and talked.

We had just made love, and the two of us were still so new

together that it continued to be an event. I lay in his arms as he placed soft kisses on my cheek.

"Ramón?"

"I'll need more time, dear; I'm still not a hundred percent you know."

I laughed. "I wasn't thinking of that, although I'll get back to you on that when you're ready."

"What's on your mind?"

"Natalie Stone. I want the bitch; she's tried to hurt you one too many times."

"Finding her without Lawson's help might prove impossible, plus, we'd be hunting her on her own turf, and that's always dangerous."

"Yes, but what's the alternative? Sit around and wait for her to attack again? That's not exactly my style."

"I hear you," he leaned over and kissed me hard on the lips. "We'll go."

"To London?"

"To London, and Europe will never be the same."

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WHEN LAWSON ARRIVED the next morning, he had another man with him, an analyst named Knutson. Knutson was the go-to-guy on Natalie Stone.

"You're helping us?" I said.

"Yes, I think you have a chance of doing what we haven't, what we can't legally do. But understand, this is all off the books and your government in no way condones your actions."

"What changed your mind?" Ramón said.

"Oh, I always thought the idea had merit, but I was in a strange office in an unfamiliar city where they employ spies. I wasn't about to agree to it where it might have been overheard, or possibly even recorded."

I walked over and kissed him on the cheek.

"Thank you, Lawson; we thought we'd have to do this alone."

"You're welcome, now let's get to work, Knutson?"

Knutson was a slim man in a black suit. He had a well-trimmed goatee and a head of graying brown hair, cut short. His voice was a deep baritone and seemed fitting for the serious business we were about to discuss.

Knutson took out an 8x10 photo of Natalie Stone.

"Stone runs a terrorist group that has roots with the IRA in Ireland. Over the years their goals of terror have morphed closer to those of profit. The organization funds itself by committing bank robbery and other types of thief, although they have been tied to three acts of terrorism just within the last eighteen months."

"You say that she seems more concerned about profit than terror, does that mean that she lives very well?"

"Oh yes, Miss Steele, we have reports of her staying at many four and five-star hotels, of course, never in the same one too long or under the same identity."

Ramón nodded at that news.

"That's good to know, her need for luxury will make her easier to find."

Knutson nodded back. "That was our thinking too, and to that end we'll…"

~

THE MEETING TOOK three hours and two pots of room service coffee. When it was over, we had a plan of attack in place as well as phony passports, driver licenses, and credit cards.

"David and Maria Reo?" I said. "So, we're married, we'll have to buy rings."

"Don't bother, just write down your sizes and we'll have them delivered to you," Lawson said.

I smiled. "It's nice to work with professionals."

"We try."

Ramón held up his passport.

"This is very helpful, but we'll also need weapons."

Lawson sighed. "Because of the nature of this operation, we'll have to use an outsider, but he comes recommended. His name and address will be delivered later with the rings."

As he was leaving, Lawson told us one last thing.

"We're helping you, but you'll be on your own over there. If it all goes to hell, run to the American embassy, also, although I left you that emergency contact number, this is still likely the last time we'll meet."

"Thank you, Lawson, and thank our mutual friend when you see him."

"I'll do that, and you two stay safe."

~

OUR PLANE DIDN'T LEAVE until the next morning, so we took the night to relax. The room we were in had a balcony. I was sitting out on it, just gazing into space and thinking.

When Ramón joined me on the wicker sofa, he didn't say anything, but just sat beside me. I welcomed the silence, as I was in a pensive mood.

"Did I tell you that Gary proposed to me?"

Ramón shook his head no.

"He asked me to marry him, I accepted, then, within a matter of hours, it was over. I think he only wanted to marry me to change me, to make me give up bounty hunting."

"You are who you are, Blue, and who you are is a woman who likes a challenge, likes the chase, and someone who isn't afraid of danger."

"I was still tempted. I've always dreamed of having my own ranch someday, of raising horses, and Gary and his family own a ranch in Bandera. If I had married him, in a way, I could have fulfilled that

dream."

"Do you miss him… regret us?"

I turned and took Ramón's face in my hands.

"No, oh honey no, despite all the turmoil that's been happening, finding you, the real you, I don't think I've ever been happier. You accept me, all of me. That means a lot."

We were quiet again. I leaned over and laid across Ramón's lap, looking up at him.

"London is going to be dangerous," I said.

"Yes, but we'll have the element of surprise; it will give us the advantage we need."

"We'll have to kill her, won't we?"

"Anything less and she'll find a way to hit back."

"Then we'll kill her, and anyone else who threatens us, because we're coming back here and we're going to discover what we can be together. I want that life; I want that new chance."

He leaned over and kissed me.

"All I want is you."

~

WE LANDED at Heathrow Airport and I found it exciting. I had never been to London, and as the taxi drove us to our hotel, I found myself wishing that I was just another tourist.

We checked in and, feeling grubby from our travels, we bathed together in the room's huge tub. I began tossing suds playfully at Ramón. He splashed me back, soaking my hair, and then we kissed until we slid into the water, and stayed under until our lungs nearly burst. When we came up for air, we began making love.

My hair was still a bit damp two hours later as we entered the luggage shop on Oxford Street. We walked directly back to the counter, where a young blond man with glasses was working the register. He seemed startled when he looked up and saw us.

"Yes… how may I help you?"

"Hello, we're here to see a Mr. Paladin," Ramón said, and I watched the store clerk's eyes widen just a touch.

"Standby please."

The clerk picked up the phone on the counter.

"Father, the buyers are here—yes, a man and a woman—all right, I'll send them right back."

He hung up the phone and pointed to a door on the right. As Ramón gripped the doorknob, the clerk hit a button and the door buzzed and opened. It revealed a narrow corridor with a door at the other end.

The clerk spoke again. “Just walk down and knock.”

We went forward, the sound of our heels clicking on the tile floor and echoing off the walls. I was wearing shoes. I had left my cowgirl boots behind in the hotel. They might have made me stand out, particularly the turquoise pair that I usually wore when I wasn’t working. I didn’t think we should stand out or be memorable in any way. We needed to fly below the radar until we took care of Natalie Stone.

When we reached the end of the corridor, we knocked. The blond man who opened the door looked like an older and heavier version of the man up front at the counter.

“Come in, come in.”

We walked into a storage room, where luggage was stacked on rolling metal carts and against the walls on wooden shelving that reached to the ceiling.

“You are both American, right?”

“Yes,” I said. “Were you able to get what we ordered?”

“Of course, I always deliver, now follow me.”

We followed along as he walked past a row of shelves and made a left. We found ourselves looking at our weapons. They were laid out atop a long table as if they were on display.

“Don’t be afraid to pick up every item and check it over; it will not offend me.”

We were already checking things as he spoke. We weren’t interested in his feelings; we were concerned with arming ourselves with reliable weapons.

We had ordered two Glock 31’s. The .357 weapons were relatively small and could be concealed under street clothes.

“What about the ammo?” I asked.

The man pointed to a box on the table.

“It’s in there, along with the spare magazines.”

Ramón held up a knife with an eight-inch serrated blade and checked it for sharpness. I would also be carrying a knife, although I disliked them. Cutting someone was nasty work and I’d much rather use a gun, but sometimes you don’t get to choose.

Ramón gestured at the guns. “Holsters?”

“Shoulder rig or hip?”

“Shoulder rig for me, Hon?”

I shook my head.

“I’ll take it as is.”

“I’ll also need a sheath for the knife.”

“No problem, sir.”

Along with the weapons, we also had two pairs of handcuffs, as it might become necessary to restrain someone at some point. While we

checked our items and took inventory, I watched the man who was providing it all. I wondered which was the sideline, the gun business, or the luggage?

Once we were done, the man placed nearly everything into a carton for transport, and we exited the way we had entered. As we walked past him, I noticed that the man at the counter was on the phone. I assumed he was talking to his father, to make sure that all went well.

I soon discovered that my assumption was false.

~

NO SOONER HAD we left the shop when a taxi pulled up to the curb and the driver called to us.

"Pardon, but was it you who called for a taxi?"

"We didn't call, but we could use one," Ramón said.

"Hop in then," the man said, he wore a cap with sunglasses and had a thick British accent.

Once we were inside the black car, the man drove eight-hundred feet and made a sharp turn into an underground garage, which had a sign out front that told you it was closed for refurbishment.

As the alarm bells in my head went off, I looked over to warn Ramón and found that he was sliding out his knife. It was the one item that hadn't gone into the box we carried with us. I was about to tell him to tear open the box to get at the ammunition and guns. That's when the car came to a violent stop and the cab driver turned and pointed a pistol at us.

"Hands, let me see your hands!"

We raised our hands up so that he could see that they were empty, and I wondered what Ramón had done with the knife. Then I spotted it embedded about four inches into the back of the passenger's seat, too low to be seen unless the driver looked down over the back of the seat.

The window on the left side of the car, Ramón's side, slid down.

"Toss that package out the window, and give it a good throw, eh?"

Ramón did as ordered, and then the man got out of the car.

"You two get out on this side now. We're almost done."

As he got out of the seat, Ramón freed the knife. When he stepped outside, Ramón brought the blade up in a sweeping arc. It caught the man beneath the chin, and a spray of blood flew from the man's throat.

The man fired once, but the shot went toward the floor, then, the gun dropped as his hands flew to his throat to stanch the bleeding. However, the cut was too deep, the gash too deadly, and he sank to

the floor inside a pool of red.

"Are you all right, Blue?"

I went to Ramón and checked him for an injury, fearful that the ricocheting bullet might have struck him.

"I'm good, Ramón, and we're both safe thanks to you. Thank God, you held onto the knife."

"The man at the counter when we left, did you notice?"

"Yes, he was on the phone, but I thought that he was checking with his father, now it looks as if he has another partner."

"You don't think the father was also involved?"

"No," I said, and gestured at the man lying dead before us. "If he were involved, then this one would have known about the knife."

"Yes, that sounds right, now I think I'll go introduce this blade to the son."

"No. That shop is full of people, and we need to fly low. We'll just report the incident to Lawson. They need to find a new third-party arms dealer."

We wiped our prints off the taxi, scooped up our box of weapons, and left the rest as it was.

As we emerged back onto the street, I pointed across at a shop window.

"I need to make a stop. I want to buy something for our next plan of action."

"What's that?"

"A disguise."

"A disguise?"

I pecked him on the lips.

"I think you'll like it."

~

BACK AT THE HOTEL, I went to work on my disguise, while Ramón called the emergency number that Lawson had given us. They had to be warned about their double-dealing gun supplier. He didn't make the call from the room, but instead, went outside to find a payphone. He would use a phony debit card to pay for the charges.

I had been in the bathroom for a while when I heard Ramón tap on the door.

"You're still in there, aren't you? You didn't accidentally flush yourself?"

"I'll be out in a second, why, do you need to use it?"

"No, I used the one in the lobby, but tell me, what kind of disguise takes this long to put on; I will still recognize you, won't I?"

I swung the door open.

“You tell me; do I still look the same?”

Ramón’s jaw dropped, and he whispered something in Spanish. I had dyed my dark hair a brilliant blonde, something I’d never done before. I thought it made me look quite different.

“Ramón, do you like it?”

He kissed me on the mouth, then laughed.

“It feels like I’m cheating on you with another woman.”

I crinkled my eyes.

“Why don’t you take her for a spin?”

The next thing I knew I was in his arms and headed for the bed.

~

LATER ON, we ordered room service and feasted. Neither of us had eaten since leaving Texas.

As it approached midnight, we got ready for our next move.

One of Natalie Stone’s known associates was a man named Martin Bruener, a suspected bomb maker. Bruener was known to practically live at a bar called The Saloon and considered himself a ladies’ man. In reality, it was his wealth that was attractive.

We were hoping to lure Bruener somewhere private, where we could interrogate him, and I was to be the bait on the hook.

The red dress I wore was so small that I was in constant danger of flashing, while my matching shoes were six-inch stilettos.

Ramón looked at me with disapproval.

“Do you have to wear that?”

“You read his profile; you know the type of women he likes.”

“Harlots!”

“Exactly, and I have to look the part.”

“Take that off! There’s no way I’m going to let you be groped just so we can get information.”

“Let me?”

“You know what I mean.”

“Why did you agree to the plan in the first place?”

“It’s one thing to talk about it, and it’s another to—do you want to do this? Do you want to… debase yourself in front of this scumbag?”

I threw my purse in a chair and sat down on the bed. The tiny dress practically rode up to my waist.

“I was doing this to help you. These people nearly killed you.”

I wiped away a tear as Ramón walked over and sat beside me, with one finger, he lifted my chin and stared into my eyes.

“Be yourself. Just be Blue Steele, my beautiful, precious Blue Steele. You’ll put the fear of God in these bastards.”

And it was at that moment that I knew I loved him.

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MARTIN BRUENER LEFT The Saloon bar & grill and climbed into a darkened cab with a woman who was not only scantily dressed, but topless. Bruener was wearing a thousand-dollar suit, but his graying beard was unkempt, and his fingernails were dirty.

As Ramón rocketed the cab away from the curb and into traffic, I greeted Bruener and the girl with a Glock in my gloved hand. I say girl, because beneath the make-up that's what she was. The cab was the same one we had been in earlier. We went back to the garage and retrieved it but left behind the dead man who once drove it.

"Marty, what's going on?" the girl said.

"Shut up!" Bruener told the girl in a German accent, and then he spoke to me. "What do you want?"

"Well talk, but first."

The cab came to a halt and I opened the door on my side and spoke to the girl.

"Climb past me and get out, and for God's sake, put your top back on."

She started crying. "I can really go?"

"Yes, do it now."

I held the gun unwaveringly pointed at Bruener's face as the girl slipped from the cab.

"Close the door, and don't call the police."

"Okay," the girl answered, then the door slammed, and we were back on the move.

"Natalie Stone, we want Natalie Stone."

Bruener turned pale. "I'm not a terrorist. I don't even know the woman."

"She's used bombs that came from you, do you deny it?"

"I admit nothing."

I placed the gun against his right knee.

"I don't have to ask you nicely."

"All right, yes, I design explosive devices; I sell to anyone with the money, but I am not political at all."

"How do they make contact?"

"There is a man named Hyte. Hyte is not a terrorist, but he is political and a criminal, he is the one who orders the explosives."

"What does Hyte look like and where can we find him?"

"He is not a handsome man. He is a brute, well over six feet tall with a shaved head and bright blue eyes. He is a gourmand and owns a restaurant in Paris so he can indulge himself, it is called the *Bonne Bouffe*, you can find him there. Now please, let me go."

I held up a cell phone. It showed a picture of a daycare center in Rome, after one of Bruener's bombs had exploded.

"This is the result of one of your bombs."

He winced at the image, then turned his face away in disgust.

"I don't use them; I just make them."

"You've made your last."

I pressed the gun against him to hide the flash, then fired three shots. Bruener jerked his head back so fast in reaction that I heard a bone crack in his neck. After a moment passed, he wheezed, slumped over, and grew still.

Ramón pulled to the curb near the entrance to the Underground and we left the cab and walked down to the tracks. We were both wearing hats with wide brims to avoid the street cameras. We'd also mapped out a route ahead of time that would allow us to return to our hotel without being tracked.

As we waited for the train, Ramón held me.

"Are you all right?"

"I don't think I like this league. I want to go back to chasing bail skips."

"We'll get our lives back once this is done."

"*Our* lives, I like the sound of that."

The subway car came, and we rode it back toward the hotel, where we made plans for Paris.

~

THE NEXT DAY, we took the high-speed railway through the Channel Tunnel and arrived in Paris.

We were on the hunt and also being hunted, but I still took time to gawk like a tourist.

Paris was as beautiful a city as London. It hurt a bit not to be there to enjoy it.

"Blue, I don't know about you, but I don't speak a word of French."

"I took it in high school, but I doubt I remember much. I do know that Hyte's restaurant, the *Bonne Bouffe* translates to Good Food, but after that I'm lost."

"Let's go find the restaurant."

"Good idea, I'm hungry."

The restaurant was located on *Rue Saint-Dominique* and its outdoor

café had a view of the Eiffel Tower. We sat inside, hoping to get a look at the man, and ate while we planned what to do next. No one there fit Hyte's description. We decided to linger as long as we could and hoped that he'd show up.

Ramón looked around the restaurant.

"This place was probably paid for with money from bank robberies."

"It is beautiful though, plus, the food is delicious. I wish that they had this dish in Texas."

After eating our meal, we sipped on coffee, hoping that Hyte would arrive. At one point, I looked up and found Ramón staring at me.

"What?"

"The blonde hair, I'm still getting used to it."

"Don't bother, it's not staying."

"Good."

"You don't like blondes?"

"I liked it at first because it was novel, but it's not you."

"As soon as we return home, I'll change back."

Ramón stood up and offered me his hand.

"Let's go. We'll come back tonight and look for Hyte."

"And in the meantime?"

"In the meantime, we enjoy Paris."

And we did just that, including the Eiffel Tower, where Ramón paid an insane amount of money for tour tickets, but it was either that or miss it, and I was so glad we didn't miss it, and took dozens of photos.

We then returned to our hotel where we made love and drank champagne. As the hour grew late, we left our room with a sigh, and went off in search of a terrorist.

~

WE ARRIVED BACK at *Bonne Bouffe* near midnight and discovered that they were on last call, but luck was with us and we found a man fitting Hyte's description talking to the bartender. He then went through a red curtain that revealed a short hallway; most likely, an office lay beyond that.

We finished our drinks and left the restaurant, to stand in the doorway of a shoe store and stare across at *Bonne Bouffe*. We were waiting for Hyte to leave, and while we waited for him to appear, his staff all went home, leaving him the only one left.

"We should have rented a car," I said.

"We don't need it. See that side door back there in the alley, next

to the Mercedes? I bet that's how Hyte comes and goes. We'll just confront him when he leaves."

We crossed the avenue and walked back toward where the car was parked. It was over an hour before the side door opened. When it did, Hyte stepped out and headed for the Mercedes.

Ramón walked toward him with the knife.

"Hyte, I'm here to ask you about Natalie Stone."

Hyte didn't even blink.

"Put that knife away or I'll stick it in your eye."

I came up behind Ramón and displayed my gun, although, we were hoping not to use it. As late an hour as it was, there was still the occasional pedestrian about, and plenty of cars drove past on the avenue.

Hyte seemed to become enraged at the sight of the gun. He charged Ramón with a speed that belied his bulk. Ramón embedded the knife in Hyte's left shoulder even as Hyte drove him back into me. The three of us kept going until I was slammed backwards into a dumpster, only to be sandwiched there by Ramón and Hyte as they struggled.

The impact knocked the breath out of me and I dropped the gun. Hyte was an animal, even with the blade deep in his shoulder, he fought Ramón fiercely. I prayed that Ramón wouldn't be injured again, after having just barely recovered from his previous beating.

I slid to the ground and searched for the gun, as Hyte placed both hands around Ramón's neck and squeezed.

Ramón tried to pry his hands off, but it was useless, then he withdrew the knife from Hyte's shoulder and jammed it in Hyte's left ear. That caused Hyte to release him, as an unearthly scream escape his mouth. That was followed by blood, then death.

Ramón leaned on the car's trunk while coughing, as I finally retrieved my gun from beneath the car.

"Are you okay?"

He nodded, then spoke in a choking voice.

"Lord, but that man had a grip. Another few seconds and he'd have crushed my windpipe."

I stared down at the corpse.

"He won't be answering any questions."

"What should we do next?"

I smiled.

"What's the smile for?"

"You asked me what to do next, most men would be telling me what they think."

"Well, I think that you're the best there is at tracking someone down. I'd be a fool to think I could do better."

“I do have an idea. We take his wallet, keys, and his car and learn as much as we can from those. If he lived alone, we’ll even have time to search his apartment.”

“Sounds good to me, but help me with the body.”

Ramón grabbed Hyte under the arms while I took his feet, and we dumped him in the Mercedes’ trunk.

We were in the car and ready to go when I realized that we should have searched the office.

Once inside, we found nothing of interest until Ramón discovered a safe built into the floor of the closet. The safe opened with a key, but after trying every key on the ring, we came up empty.

“There’s one more place that it might be,” I said, and began going through the filing cabinet.

The key turned up at the rear of the bottom drawer.

“I never would have thought to look there,” Ramón said.

“My boss, Ron Tenney, it’s where he keeps his, although he doesn’t know that I know that.”

The key turned easily and revealed several bundles of Euro banknotes; the colorful money was wrapped in rubber bands. Ramón scoped them out and handed it all to me. Afterward, he dug farther down, to reveal several photos.

In two of the photos, Hyte was seated beside Natalie Stone at a table, in what looked like another restaurant.

Ramón flipped it over and saw the words, *Le Garder*, my high school French kicked in and I translated it.

“The Castle? No, wait, The Keep, *Le Garder* is The Keep.”

Ramón rushed back over to the filing cabinet.

“I just saw those same words somewhere… yeah, here it is. It looks like Hyte owns that place too. There are receipts here for food deliveries, utilities, and… an alarm system, with a hand-written set of alarm codes.”

“What’s the address?”

“It’s back in London.”

“Then so are we, let’s gather everything out of the safe and take it with us. We’re going back to London.”

~

Le Garder TURNED out to be a quaint little eatery near the north bank of the Thames. It was in an area that was industrial. It was nearly five o’clock in the morning when we found it and we decided to risk going in to look around.

The restaurant sat on the opposite side of an alley that had yet another restaurant on the other side, but that was more of a hash

house, which served only breakfast and lunch.

We had the keys and the alarm codes but had no way of knowing if the hand-written codes were still valid. We avoided the front door and looked for a side entrance. We found it halfway down the length of the building and tried the keys until we found the right one.

We entered, and the ghosts of devoured meals haunted the place with the aroma of food, making me realized that I was hungry.

Ramón searched the wall by the door with his eyes.

"There's no alarm pad."

I looked down a dimly lit corridor and spotted an alarm pad next to another door.

"There's one down there."

We rushed to it, expecting to find it blinking rapidly, but all was well, and the alarm seemed undisturbed.

Ramón pointed back the way we'd come. "The kitchen, restrooms, and pantries are back there, so what's on the other side of this door?"

I pointed at the steel door. "There's no lock, just a handle," I tried it, but the latch wouldn't release.

Ramón began pressing buttons on the alarm pad.

"I don't think this is an alarm, I think it's an electronic lock."

We heard a clicking sound as the pad on the wall beeped approval.

Ramón went to push the door open, but I halted him by grabbing his wrist.

"Weapons, we don't know what or who might be in there."

He nodded agreement, took out his gun, and eased the door open.

There was another room, actually four. One room was much like the dining area up front, with tables, chairs, and even a small bar with stools. While the second room contained a sectional leather sofa that faced a sixty-inch flat screen television with surround sound and a video game system. The third room had pinball machines and a real jukebox, but the fourth and final room was the most interesting. It was an office, or maybe more of a conference room with a long table in the middle that could seat twelve. There was even a projector, along with a huge screen, the type used for PowerPoint presentations.

"It's a private club; The Keep is a private club," Ramón said.

"Not just a social club though, this might be where they plan their attacks."

Ramón gestured about. "This is bigger than just Natalie. If this room were wired with cameras and sound, who knows what could be learned. We can't take out Natalie here, this place is too valuable. We need to let Lawson know about it."

CLUNK!

The sound came from the restaurant, or more specifically from the side door we had entered through.

We went back and closed the connecting door until it was almost shut. We listened but heard nothing else.

"Let's check it out," I said.

We took a few quick photos and left everything the way we'd found it. We locked the door from the inside, then left by the rear door at the back of the conference room. This one also had a keypad on both sides of the door. After exiting into a back alley, we reset the lock and crept toward the front of the building, with guns at the ready.

When we reached the side door, we discovered what had made the sound we heard. It was a box of bread; the local bakery must have dropped off that day's delivery for the restaurant. I was already hungry, but the aroma of the warm croissants made my mouth water. I reached into the box and scooped out two from a paper sack, to hand one to Ramón.

"Thank you, Blue, but where's the coffee?"

"We'll have some soon, but first we need to contact Lawson."

~

"A TERRORIST CLUBHOUSE?" Lawson said over the phone.

"We think so. We have pictures, keys, and the alarm codes to get inside."

We had checked into another hotel in a different section of London. I had just taken a shower and told Ramón that I would call Lawson from a payphone outside, while he freshened up. We hadn't slept all night and were running on just the croissants we'd stolen from the bakery bag. Needless to say, room service was on its way.

"This Hyte, what did you do with his body?"

"It's locked away in the trunk of his car. You'll want to clean that up too. If it gets out that he's dead, Natalie and her friends might grow suspicious."

"We'll handle it. Interpol should hire you two, fantastic work," Lawson said.

"What do you want to do with all this?" I asked.

"I'll notify MI5, I'm also sending over a team, a surveillance team, with an ops team to follow. We'll have that room completely wired by this time tomorrow. If and when Natalie Stone shows up, we'll let you know. I'll call your cell phone within the hour about when and where to drop off the keys and alarm codes."

"That sounds good, but tell me, what happened with the arms dealer that tried to double-cross us?"

"I was going to ask you about that. Did you two go back and pay them a visit?"

"No, it would have been too public, so we passed it on to you."

"Someone beat us to it. We found the father dead in the back room, and there was no sign of his son."

"Perhaps they had a disagreement. We didn't think the father was involved, if he were, then why even bother with the taxi, why not just kill us in the back room?"

"Yes, I see your point; I think I'll dig deeper into the son's background."

"All right, and let us know what you find."

"I will, Lawson out."

~

I RETURNED to find room service being delivered. By the time I had my coffee prepared, Ramón exited the bathroom freshly showered, but looking exhausted.

"Good timing," I said, and then I filled him in on Lawson. When I was done, he asked a question.

"What's next? Personally, I think we should sleep. I don't know about you, but I'm tired, my side also hurts from where Hyte hit me."

I put down my cup. "Are you hurt? Did you get re-injured?"

"I'll be fine, but I could use some sleep."

My phone rang. It was Lawson calling with the meeting details. When I ended the call, I stood.

"Lawson wants The Keep materials handed off to a man who'll be in the lobby of the Hilton. Why don't you go to bed while I take care of it?"

"I don't like the idea of you going off alone?"

"It's nearby, and I'll join you in bed when I get back."

"All right, but take your gun."

"I will."

I kissed him and left for the meeting. When I got downstairs, I debated whether to use Hyte's car one more time and deliver it to Lawson's man. We had dumped it in a parking garage a block from the hotel. I decided against it though and took a cab instead.

~

THE MEETING at the Hilton went off without incident and I returned to our hotel less than an hour later. As I was exiting my taxi, I spotted a familiar face seated in a car parked at the curb. It was the blond man from the counter of the luggage shop.

He was staring at the entrance of the hotel as if he were waiting for someone to come out. He must have felt my eyes on him, because

he turned his head and looked at me, but I saw no hint of recognition. Then I remembered that he had never seen me with blonde hair.

As I rushed toward the car, he suddenly realized who I was and shouted for the driver to take off. I was too slow and reached the door an instant before the car sprinted into the traffic.

Ramón!

He was upstairs, alone, asleep, and they had likely sent someone up to kill us. I ran through the lobby as I called his phone, while being fortunate enough to snag an empty elevator.

No answer. C'mon, pick up! Pick up! Oh God, please pick up!

The elevator opened onto our floor and I ran toward our room. When I was in sight of it, I saw that the door was sitting open.

Oh God, no, oh dear God, no.

I took out my gun and crept forward, dreading what I might find. When I reached the doorway, I saw nothing amiss in the living room of the suite, and so I headed to the bedroom.

It seemed to come to me in pieces then, as I fell to my knees in despair.

First, I saw the blood, so much blood.

Second, the body atop the bed.

And finally, my future, empty.

Ramón was dead.

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“BLUE?”

I swung my head around at the sound of my name and saw Ramón. He was standing in the bathroom doorway while holding a white towel to his arm. The towel was rapidly turning red from a gash, but he was alive.

He was alive!

I leapt off the floor and went to him.

“Oh God, I thought that was you.”

“No, baby, it’s okay, I’m okay.”

“Your arm?”

“It’s a deep cut; I’ll need stitches.”

“What happened?”

“I’ll tell you, but first, let’s lock that door.”

I followed him to the front of the suite. After the door was locked, we sat on the sofa and he told me what had happened.

“I tried to sleep, but I couldn’t, not until you were back here safe and sound. I went down the hall to get more coffee from the machine, and when I came back, I found him entering the room. After I burned him with the coffee, we struggled over his gun and I managed to make him drop it. He took out a knife, I took out mine… and he lost. The gun has a silencer; it’s in there laying on the sink.”

“Let me see your arm.”

When he pried the towel away, I gasped, as blood ran freely from the wound.

“Oh God, that is deep. You do need stitches, and we need help, I’m calling Lawson. I also need to let him know that the man from the luggage shop was behind this. I saw him downstairs when I arrived back. That’s his man lying in there.”

I grabbed Ramón around the neck and hugged him.

“When I saw that body lying face down on the bed, I thought that I had lost you.”

He hugged me back with his one good arm.

“I’m not going anywhere, Blue.”

I took out my phone, dialed, and heard him answer.

“Lawson.”

“We have a problem…”

~

TWO HOURS LATER, we were in another hotel and Ramón's left forearm was stitched and bandaged.

We were lying in bed together; both of us were tired, but we couldn't seem to go to sleep.

"Blue?"

"Yes?"

"This ranch you want to own, what's it like?"

I smiled. "I've been thinking about it and saving up for it for years. I want to raise quarter horses. I love everything about them, their speed, their grace, their beauty. It's my dream."

"It does sound nice, but then, I've never been on a horse."

"Well fix that when we get back; I'll take you riding."

"I look forward to it."

I caressed his cheek. "Do you have a dream?"

"I didn't, but I do now."

"What is it?"

"This, being with you, just holding you like this. I could stay like this forever."

"Were you always interested in me?"

"Yes, I mean, look how we met, you were like a tiger protecting Amy, saving her from those men. How could I not be interested?"

"You never said anything."

"You were with someone and thought of me as just a friend. I accepted it."

"But when you thought I was in danger, you protected me and risked your own life to do it."

"Just because we weren't together, it didn't mean that I didn't—"

"Love me?"

"Yes, I loved you. I felt it that first day we met, but I wouldn't admit it, not even to myself."

"And now?"

"And now I know I'll never stop loving you. I love you, Blue."

We were lying on our backs, both naked. I moved up to lie atop him and stared into his eyes.

"I love you too, Ramón."

He hugged me to him, my breasts flattening against his chest, as our lips became one. Then we lied there like that, as one, and drifted off to a peaceful slumber.

~

LAWSON CALLED us the next day. They had tied the man from the

luggage store to Natalie Stone. That meant that the two of them had been working together all along.

"How did you make the connection?"

"Prints found on the luggage shop cash register matched an unidentified set of prints we found in Texas. He probably recognized you two the moment you walked through the door. That also marks him as one of Natalie Stone's inner circle. We've intensified our search for him."

"So, she's known all along that we've been here? That means that they weren't trying to kill Ramón, but they were trying to abduct him again."

"It looks that way, yes, but we were able to wire The Keep today, for pictures and sound. We're in a Mobile Command Center that's disguised as a motor home, watching, waiting."

"I hate watching and waiting, but for now, I guess it's our best bet. Keep in touch, Lawson. We really want that bitch."

"I hear you, stay safe, Lawson out."

I put the phone down and leaned back on the sofa.

"It's a waiting game now."

Ramón stood. "I've an idea."

"What's that?"

"Do you remember what Knutson said, about Stone living well? As long as we have nothing to do, why don't we stake out luxury hotels? I know she won't be staying anywhere under her own name, but maybe we'll get lucky and spot her."

I thought about it, thought about the endless hours of waiting and watching, and dreaded it, but then, I realized that we had no other leads.

"We'll do it. While Lawson's people are watching The Keep, we'll be searching for Natalie."

~

WE MADE out a list of four and five-star hotels in London. When the list was a hundred names long, we stopped.

We then spent our days sitting in hotel lobbies, and our nights gazing through the windows of restaurants hoping to spot her. Had I been alone, I would had gone out of my mind with boredom, but Ramón kept me laughing with his commentary about the people we saw coming and going. On the evening of the ninth day, we got lucky.

I pointed to a woman walking out of a Hotel in SoHo.

"That's her, isn't it?"

Ramón adjusted his binoculars. We were sitting in a rented car. He did all the driving, because I nearly killed us the first time I tried

driving on the left side of the road.

"That is her and look who's driving the car she's getting into."

I trained my binoculars on the driver and saw the man from the luggage shop.

"Two for the price of one,"

"How do you want to play this?" Ramón asked. "Should we call Lawson?"

"Not yet, let's follow them first. We already know what hotel she's staying in, now maybe they'll lead us somewhere without a lot of people around. If they do, then we'll strike."

~

IT TURNED out that they were going to dinner, and the restaurant was only a few blocks away.

Ramón stared through his binoculars.

"Cheese Soufflé, do you think she eats like this every night?"

"Yes, judging by the size of that butt."

Ramón made a cat sound, and we both laughed, but then we both sighed at the same time.

"We have to kill them," I said.

"Yes."

"We'll do it when the valet leaves to get the car."

"Right here, out in the open? There will be cameras?"

I reached in my purse and pulled out a gun.

"She nearly killed you in Texas just to make you talk, and almost abducted you again here. She's out of chances and so is he."

~

WE WATCHED as they exited the restaurant and sent the valet off to fetch their vehicle.

They were kissing when we came up on them from out of the shadows of a nearby doorway. Despite the darkness, we both wore sunglasses, while our hats obscured our faces.

I shot Natalie Stone in the stomach, while using the silenced pistol that was left behind during her last attempt to harm my man. While I was doing that, Ramón silenced her lover with his knife.

As she collapsed to the pavement, I saw a look of incredulity in Stone's eyes, for she had never expected prey to become predator.

With the man lying dead beside her, Ramón stood next to me and gazed down at Natalie. I placed a bullet between her eyes, dropped the gun atop the knife, and walked twelve paces to a waiting car.

Lawson spoke to his man. "Drive!"

I took off the hat and sunglasses. “Are you sure the cameras were off?”

“Yes, courtesy of a very grateful MI5. A man named Ahmed Kalheed entered The Keep yesterday. The Brits have been searching for him for years. We’ve also gained other valuable information and learned about two other similar terrorist safe houses. You two may have come here for just Natalie Stone, but by discovering that terrorist retreat, you’ve done immeasurably more.”

“Happy to help,” I said.

We arrived at the airport and Lawson shook our hands as we prepared to board the private jet that would take us home. It seemed as if we now rated a touch of luxury.

“We know about the rental, but is there anything you’ve left behind that you’ll want back?”

I thought about it, looked down at my turquoise boots, and remembered that I had the pictures we took of Paris in my purse.

“I’m good.”

“If you two ever want a job, contact me through our mutual friend, or maybe I’ll contact you.”

“I’ve had enough international intrigue to last a lifetime.”

“Same here,” Ramón said.

We climbed onto the plane, buckled up, and held hands.

“Are you all right, Blue?”

“I was just thinking of Natalie Stone. Terrorism and bank robbery aside, she just wanted to get her daughter back. On that level, I could understand her. Ramón, is the little girl really safe?”

He gazed at me for a moment.

“I think it’s time you met my family.”

“But I thought that you weren’t in contact with them anymore?”

“Not my real family, my true family.”

“I don’t understand?”

“You will once you meet them; we’ll go when we get back.”

“All right, and speaking of family, my mama knew that you loved me before I did. She said that any man who would risk his life to save me must be in love with me.”

“She sounds like a wise woman.”

“She is, and I’d like you to meet her.”

“We have all the time in the world now, and something much better.”

“What’s that?”

He smiled. “We have now, right now.”

I lay my head on his shoulder as the plane climbed into the night, and even in my dreams, we were together.

~

SANTUARIO, Texas, Population 278

WALTER CALVIN WELCOMED me with open arms and gave me a heartfelt hug.

"My boy Ramón has finally brought a girl home to meet me; that makes me very happy."

"Blue is special, Walter."

Walter smiled at Ramón like a proud father.

"Well then, that makes two of you."

Walter Calvin was about sixty, lanky, with a receding hairline and crinkly blue eyes.

"Ramón, I hope you're going to visit while you're here, several people have asked about you lately."

"I am, in fact, Blue and I are going to take a walk about town."

Walter looked surprised by that, but then smiled.

"I see; she truly is special."

Ramón nodded. "Yes."

"Blue," Walter said. "I look forward to our dinner tonight. I'd like to get to know you."

I smiled.

"I'd like that too. Ramón has told me how you changed his life."

Walter brushed that aside. "My boy changed his own life, and mine. This was nothing but a retreat with tents when he came here. He's the one who turned it into a town and a community, but I'll let Ramón explain that to you."

We left Walter's small home and strolled about the picturesque town. A town that was surprisingly diverse for West Texas. I saw Venezuelans, Germans, and even Ethiopians. They all greeted Ramón as if he were family. They all also asked one question. They wanted to know if I was going to be a new resident. When Ramón told them no, they then beamed at me with knowing smiles.

Ramón led me into an ice-cream parlor. We were going to bring some back for dessert. It was there that I met the charming Irishman with the daughter who bore a striking resemblance to the late Natalie Stone.

As we left the shop, I whispered to Ramón.

"That was Natalie's daughter, wasn't it?"

"Yes, along with her husband. They've been here five years."

I stopped suddenly, and my mouth opened in shock as the truth hit me.

"This, this town, this is your witness protection program, isn't it? Is everyone here in hiding?"

“Everyone but Walter, and others like me who left the gang life. These people protect each other, safeguard each other’s secrets, while minding their own business. If Natalie had broken me, if I had told her about this place, she would have been facing an entire town, hundreds of people. I’ve no doubt that they would have fought, and they would have won.”

I stepped back from him and gazed about the town, the town that he had made, this town of Santuario, this town of sanctuary.

“Oh my God.”

Ramón stared at me. “Blue?”

I caressed his face.

“I love you, and if I didn’t already love you, I would fall in love again. Do you know what you’ve done here?”

“I’m keeping people safe.”

“It’s even better than that; you’ve given them a second chance.”

“I’m only repaying the second chance that Walter gave me.”

As we strolled back to Walter’s house, with ice cream in hand, I marveled at the changes and turmoil my life had recently undergone. Then, I came to a realization.

I was happy, truly happy… even if my name was Blue.

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